

The Satanic Verses

Reading the Novel as a Discourse of Resistance

by

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**A Thesis Presented to
The Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages
The University of Oslo
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the M.A. Degree
Autumn Term 2005**

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis and its particular thematic probing is the result of an increasing passion and interest in questions related to the Muslim presence in Europe, as well as an attempt to understand modern literature's impact upon Muslim culture and the formation of cultural and religious identity.

It has been an interesting and clearly challenging journey, one which I could not have undertaken without the invaluable advice of my supervisor, professor Tore Rem, who has encouraged me to push and extend my limits throughout this demanding research. I would like to thank him for his influence and guidance as I have carried out the enjoyable and stimulating task of writing a thesis. I would also like to give special thanks to my family and friends in particular, for putting up with me and my continuous 'academic' talks throughout this extensive venture. Finally, this study could not have been undertaken without the contributions of several knowledgeable writers and scholars, whose extensive research on the Rushdie affair and relevant issues have been of great and invaluable interest.

INTRODUCTION

In 1988, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* was banned as blasphemous in several countries, and in 1989 the novel was burned by Muslims in England. After a *fatwa* was issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini, calling for the death of the author and his publishers, several large bookstores withdrew the books, mostly out of fear for the safety of employees and patrons.

In the recent case of Salman Rushdie and *The Satanic Verses* - according to Daniel Pipes, "one of the rarest and strangest events in history" - a government "picked a fight with a private individual in a foreign country", and Rushdie's novel became the source of an international diplomatic crisis (Pipes: 232). The controversy started in India, from there it moved to Great Britain, then it travelled to the United States and finally to South Africa, Pakistan and Iran. The controversy engaged "thousands of individuals in protest, from renowned American writers to obscure Bengali rioters" (15-16). The Rushdie case stirred powerful emotions on a global level, and raised important questions about Muslim diasporas and their relationship to the societies around them. It also proved that there is a distinct relationship between artistic freedom, morality and law, and it raised the question whether censorship is justified if it is in the interest of saving human lives (18).

Although the Rushdie case apparently had little to do with economics, diplomacy or politics, it had bearings on millions of individuals around the world. At the time of the publication, the world was changing politically, and it was witnessing a resurgent religious fundamentalism. All of a sudden, a novel, *The Satanic Verses*, partook in the new Holy War between the West and parts of the Muslim world. There is little doubt that the Iranian government used the Rushdie case politically in order to increase its power. At the same time, some Western countries used the case in order to contrast Western

liberal democracy with what was perceived as dangerous, fundamentalist countries. Khomeini had been deprived of a victory against Iraq on the war front, and to him, “*The Satanic Verses* must have seemed as yet another international, imperialist conspiracy against the Islamic Revolution” (Rahnema: 93). By issuing a *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie on 14 February 1989, calling on “all zealous Muslims to execute Rushdie for having insulted Islamic sanctities” (93), Khomeini successfully managed to arouse transnational concern because of the shared perception that Muslims and Islam were under attack and required defence (Eickelman: 146). At a swift political stroke, Khomeini accelerated the conflict between “the West and the Rest”¹ and made Salman Rushdie an enemy of Islam. In a devious manoeuvre, he “placed the entire world under his jurisdiction” and rallied “the immigrant Muslim peoples of Europe to the banner of Islam” (Kepel: 190).

The Rushdie case, still highly relevant today, has presented us with a conflict in which the West, from a Western point of view, seems to be in possession of all the virtue, while the Muslim world is “the personification of impure bigotry” (Webster: 29). By making Salman Rushdie an enemy of Islam, Khomeini simultaneously and unintentionally made Rushdie a hero and a champion of free speech in the West. In the wake of the Rushdie case, Islam emerged, although perhaps incorrectly, as an enemy of Western liberal democratic values.

It can be argued that Rushdie overstepped the boundaries of artistic freedom. However, he was in many ways misunderstood, not only in the Muslim world, but surprisingly also in the West. Thus, I will argue that his critics, both in the East and the West, did him severe disservice. Whereas a large majority of critics in the Muslim world

¹ Kishore Mahbubani’s famous phrase first came up when discussing the future of world politics in the essay “The West and the Rest”, published in *The National Interest*, 1992. My reference is taken from Samuel Huntington’s essay “The Clash of Civilisations”, published in *Foreign Affairs*, 2002. Here Huntington refers to Mahbubani’s phrase when predicting a coming cultural ‘clash’ between “nations and groups of different civilizations.”

in certain ways misinterpreted Rushdie's work as being solely an attack on religious faith, the West chose to make the Rushdie case into a huge, basically "revolutionary free speech issue from a 'marginalized subaltern'" (Booker: 87). According to Feroza Jussawalla, the West saw *The Satanic Verses* as a discourse solely "as counter to the hegemony of Islamic fundamentalism", whereas Rushdie's purpose was to portray his two protagonists as "characters looking backward at a liberatory [sic] history of Islamic struggle with affection (dilruba) and respect (meheruban)" (89).² Jussawalla's view can be discussed, as can Rushdie's self-presentation, but I will argue that Jussawalla makes a plausible point when she claims that Rushdie's project was not to attack Islam in general.

My argument in this thesis is that, despite the quite understandable charges of blasphemy, Rushdie's project was meant to be a program for liberation. By analysing *The Satanic Verses* and Rushdie's exploration of migration and voices of identity in particular, I will attempt to reveal the radical nature of the novel and Rushdie's philosophical probing. To a certain extent, *The Satanic Verses* exposes religion and history to be false constructs, thereof the uproar. However, Rushdie can be said to merely play with all kinds of absolutisms in order to make the migrant question his/her identity. Thus, he primarily explores the aspects upon which identity is based, whether these are destructive or constructive. As a consequence of his philosophical probing into the issues of migration and identity, Rushdie asks all throughout the novel: "What kind of an idea are you?" (SV: 345)³ Are you the kind that compromises in order to adjust and survive, or are you intolerant, narrow-minded and uncompromising? In order to claim identity, do you submit to destructive grand narratives, based on false ideas, created by blurring the boundaries between facts and fantasy? In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie warns us that our

² The statement is taken from Feroza Jussawalla's essay "Rushdie's *Dastan-e-Dilruba: The Satanic Verses* as Rushdie's Love Letter to Islam" in Keith M. Booker, p. 78-106

³ *The Satanic Verses*

identity at times is constructed of false and deceptive images, restrictive to individual progress. As he clearly shows in the novel, both his protagonists are haunted by the past, and thus they have problems creating sound identities. Gibreel Faristha is haunted by the ghost of a former lover, and Saladin Chamcha by the memories and images of his father. Another character, Rosa Diamond, spends all her time dreaming about the past, and therefore she lives most of her life in solitude. According to Rushdie:

We live in ideas. Through images we seek to comprehend our world. And through images we sometimes seek to subjugate and dominate others. But picture-making, imagining, can also be a process of celebration, even of liberation. New images can chase out the old. (IH: 147)⁴

Rushdie claims that “imagery and received ideas” work on several levels (146). The process of imagination can “falsify, demean, ridicule, caricature and wound as effectively as it can clarify, intensify and unveil” (143). I will argue that *The Satanic Verses*, although it may ridicule certain Islamic sanctities, more than anything attempts to ‘clarify and unveil’ how false ideas and imagery create unhealthy environments in which both racism and religious fundamentalism can thrive. In order to break down absolutes, the novel illustrates the danger of deception. Rushdie warns us how our false ideas of the world, communicated endlessly via mass media and political and religious elites, develop into stereotypical contrasts which increasingly work to make the world more dangerous. Through his fiction therefore, Rushdie advises us to create “well-made pictures” in order to open our eyes to everyday reality (143). The responsibility for our actions is ours alone. Instead of reallocating responsibility to some external instance such as God, history or any other grand narrative, we must, as Chamcha eventually realises, shake off false history and “enter the process of renewal, of regeneration” (SV: 548).

⁴ *Imaginary Homelands*

Rushdie's main concern is therefore one of reform, and he undertakes the task by exploring the process of hybridization and the condition of the migrant in particular. Greatly influenced by the writer Günter Grass, whom he regards as "a figure of central importance in the literature of migration", he attempts to explore how the migrant, "the born-across human" faced with the loss of language, roots and social norms, tries to find "new ways of being human"(IH: 278). According to Rushdie, this "triple disruption of reality", ensures that the migrant discovers that reality is nothing but an artefact and that the only certainty is doubt (280).

The issue of doubt versus faith is a major theme in *The Satanic Verses*, connecting all the various topics in the novel. Undoubtedly the parable of the founding of Islam is coupled to the condition of the migrant in particular. As the migrant has to reinvent reality, to reconstruct it "from rubble" while separating myths from facts, he/she faces tremendous torment and struggle, much the same as the Prophet when receiving his visions in the early days of Islam. As the migrant is up against an intolerant conservative ideology, facing hostile anti-immigration laws and attitudes based on ignorance and simple dichotomies, the Prophet founded his religion in an environment of ignorance, darkness and resistance. As the migrant feels dislocated and rootless, so did the earlier nomads of Jahilia (the Mecca of the novel) feel as "rootless as the dunes" (SV: 96). And, furthermore, just as the migrant has to engage in an act of philosophical probing into evil and good in order to reclaim a sound identity, so did the Prophet struggle with the same issues. Who am I? (113). Who is God and who is the devil respectively? Who is responsible for the revelation? For both antagonists, the main question is one of reality versus myth. Can we trust the stories we are told, the 'verses' or ideologies which are imposed upon us? How do we know what is real? Throughout the novel, Rushdie dramatises how our torment and struggle present us with conflicting choices of identity:

How we are torn between choices of compromise versus confrontation. Mahound, the Prophet, struggled with ideas and images reflected through his visions, much the same as the migrant of today's post-modern society struggles with how to decode or recode images and ideas in order to survive and prosper.

Rushdie exemplifies this quest for identity by his use of 'the fall' as a metaphor for rebirth. Clearly, this kind of rebirth is a painful one. As the narrator repeatedly claims throughout the novel: "To be born again, first you have to die" (SV: 3). To Rushdie, the death of the old self, however painful, is a necessary step to regain freedom. But while he expresses this particular 'death' through *The Satanic Verses*, this "reconciling of the old and the new" by a rejection of absolutisms, and replaces them with "hybridity, impurity, intermingling" and "change-by-fusion", his postmodernist vision clearly collides with those who violently oppose the novel, and to whom identity is based upon the very grand narratives that Rushdie rejects, the narrative of Islam in particular (IGF: 4)⁵.

Thus, while trying to give a voice to minority groups such as Muslim diasporas across the world, Rushdie, writing in a culture organized around an individualistic, liberal-pluralist "nothing matters and everything goes" ideology, faced the collective, what Philip Roth once called a totalitarian "everything matters and nothing goes" culture, completely at odds with Western post-modernity (Appignanesi: 246-247).⁶ In other words, Rushdie's celebration of pluralism was clearly taken badly in communities trying to reshape their Muslim identities under the pressure of assimilation politics. If there was no single story or grand narrative left to hold things together, or more precisely, if the story or "idea" of Islam, as Rushdie calls it, was nothing but another story, with no priority over any other, what was then left of the organizing principle? What was there to live by?

⁵ "In Good Faith"

⁶ Carlos Fuentes quotes Philip Roth in his article "In Words Apart" in *The Rushdie File*

With hindsight, there can be little doubt that the iconoclastic nature of *The Satanic Verses* proved too difficult to accept. Rushdie's attempt to portray a world as rounded as possible, his aim of making Muslims re-think and re-work the contents of the past failed for several reasons. Firstly, according to Muslims, the novel was highly blasphemous and offensive, both when it came to language and themes. Secondly, Rushdie's literary experiment, of mixing facts with myths, proved alien to those tending to read literally. Although Rushdie's blasphemy mostly occurs in dream sequences, and his novel is a work of fiction, he was facing a dilemma. When he played with the account of the early Muslim history and the founding of Islam, according to Fehti Benslama, by "stripping the cover off everything," and calling everything into question, by "featuring the unbelievable and promoting the unnameable," he crossed a line unacceptable to most Muslims (Braziller: 91).⁷

Even if Rushdie was clearly attempting to draw attention to the migrant condition in particular, while unravelling the danger of religious fundamentalism, Rushdie was accused of tearing down the very foundations of religious faith in general. However, as his character Bhupen the poet, states, "we can't deny the ubiquity of faith" (SV: 551). By prejudging religious belief to be "deluded or false", we will ourselves be guilty of imposing our own "world-view on the masses" (551). This, I will argue, seems close to Rushdie's own view, accepting the ubiquity and importance of religious faith, but attacking the darker by-products of religion, the view that everything is clearly so and so, i.e., either you obey dogmas or you are not religious. To Rushdie, this black and white view is unfounded. As he insists, a person's "spiritual choices are a matter of conscience, arrived at after deep reflection and in the privacy of his heart", rather than a public matter (IH: 430). Rushdie denies the vision of the true believer, sometimes a militant, for whom

⁷ Fehti Benslama's essay "Rushdie, or the Textual Question", in Braziller. p. 82-91

there is no question that he is simply right and you are wrong (416). Feroza Jussawalla claims that Rushdie:

Undertakes the rewriting of a sacred book not to target and satirize, not to create a counterhegemonic discourse, but to correct a wrong [retelling the story of Islam] out of the love for his religion and his forefathers. (Booker: 91)

According to Jussawalla, Rushdie is by no means rejecting Islam, he rather aims to present the religion as it used to be practised in the India of his forefathers, in “an atmosphere of mixing and merging”, in an atmosphere of tolerance (82). Jussawalla has a plausible argument. In his essay “Zia ul-Haq.17 August 1988”,⁸ Rushdie clearly stresses his opinion that “Islam is no more monolithically cruel, no more an ‘evil empire’, than Christianity, capitalism or communism”, and that “to be a believer is not by any means to be a zealot” (IH: 54). To Rushdie, General Zia merely represented the ugliest, most horrific face of the faith, what Rushdie believes is a fundamentalist faith that most (Pakistani) Muslims reject and detest.

Rushdie’s hybridized Islam, a mixture of Sufism, Hinduism and philosophy was not appreciated in a fundamentalist climate, however, nor was his project properly understood in the West. Due to political events, both in the West and across the Muslim world, his novel was used as a political means and in certain ways misinterpreted. Thus, as Jussawalla observes, Rushdie found himself “‘lurking in the ruins awaiting demons’” (Booker: 91).

It was my original aim in this thesis to focus solely upon the extent to which political circumstances influenced, or actually were the basic driving force, behind the Rushdie case. My early survey, however, showed that while extensive, indeed almost exhaustive

⁸ In *Imaginary Homelands*

research had been conducted on the topics of geopolitics and the *fatwa*, there had been less research on the issue of how the shaping of Muslim ethnicity and identity through religion conflicts with *The Satanic Verses*. Consequently, while analysing the text-internal factors giving offence, I will simultaneously explore the interconnection between the concept of honour and shame and the novel's themes.

In addition to this, I will raise the question as to whether Rushdie's particular use of rhetoric was one of liberation or of power and dominance. Rushdie claims that his use of language was a deliberate attempt at "turning insults into strengths", an act of "reclaiming language from one's opponents (IGF: 11). However, he was accused of joining "the league of Orientalists" precisely by using medieval Christian terms (Appignanesi: 176). I will discuss Edward Said's theories of 'Orientalism' in order to assess whether the accusations towards Rushdie are justified.

The Rushdie case proves that art can be powerful, but it affects readers differently in Islamic societies versus Christian Western societies. *The Satanic Verses* caused deaths and bloodshed because of a few controversial passages. According to Rushdie, one cannot simply "drag" two chapters "out of the whole", but must read the novel in its entirety, since by singling out passages, one loses sight of "the actually existing book" (IGF: 5). I consider the validity of such a claim as somewhat naive. Although idealistically one has to read a literary work as a whole in order to analyse its potential literary or artistic value, clearly this way of approaching literature does not harmonise with what readers actually do. Many Muslim readers did not consider it necessary to read the novel as a whole, since in their view the mere title in itself proved blasphemous. There is obviously a huge difference in literary traditions, which raises highly relevant questions about the role of art.

Consequently, I will briefly reflect upon the issues of literature, aestheticism and censorship. In my view, the reception of *The Satanic Verses* has highlighted the importance of literature and rhetoric, as well as emphasized the complex interactions between the Islamic world and the West. Literary and cultural issues in this novel have shaped our (the Westerner's) image of *the other* in an unprecedented way.

My thesis will therefore conclude with some brief reflections on the issues of freedom of expression and ethics and morality. I will ask the question, is freedom of expression the same as freedom to offend? Despite the fact that Rushdie's project can be justified, it is important to consider whether a complete freedom of expression might lead to anarchy and a completely amoral universe, as Richard Webster claims (Webster: 61). Issues of ethics and morality are highly important, particularly in today's increasingly plural society. There is a great tension between the morality, ethics and artistic freedom encompassing the whole Rushdie affair. I will argue that some of the criticism in the defence of Rushdie overlooked the issues of ethics and morality – particularly as viewed from a Muslim perspective. In order to understand the controversy, it is important not only to analyse and respect different religious beliefs, feelings and practises, but to protect them from false misconceptions, ridicule and contempt.

The issues of ethics and morality have on the whole been discussed within a Western paradigm. This is obvious if we look at the defence of Salman Rushdie. Many eminent writers, particularly Western ones, have strongly supported Rushdie. E.L. Doctorow, for instance, believes that Rushdie did the right thing in writing and publishing his novel, even if he caused great insult. Doctorow insists that it is the writer's task to present the truth in the name of democracy, and quotes Waldo Emerson who claimed that "the writer lives in a universe of language; [and] his mind is a democracy of contentious voices, each claiming to be the truth, and he hears them all and gives voice to

them all” (Appignanesi: 170). Rushdie, following in his footsteps, gives voice to controversial voices indeed. What is the consequence, however, of giving voice to highly offensive opinions? Doctorow, quoting Emerson, believes that “all that can be thought can be written”, since “a man is the faculty of reporting, and the universe is the possibility of being reported” (170). While being deeply concerned about a writer’s rights, moral and ethics, Doctorow also interestingly claims that “good fiction is interested in the moral fate of its people” (Levine: 40). Obviously, it is an impossible task to simultaneously consider the rights of writers and the rights of various peoples across the world. How for instance, was the moral fate of millions of Muslims affected by *The Satanic Verses*? And, furthermore, are the issues of morality and ethics only to be discussed within the framework of Western liberal democracy, values inherited from Enlightenment philosophy?

It is apparent from analysing E.L. Doctorow’s claims and those of many others, that they contradict each other. Thus, the right to freedom of expression cannot be unlimited. It has always carried special duties and responsibilities. In many countries it is subjected to certain restrictions. As stated in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the right to freedom of expression is restricted both when it comes to the “respect of the rights or reputations of others”, and when it concerns “the protection of national security or of public order[...], or of public health or morals” (Appignanesi: 211, 212).

Clearly, there is an interconnection between censorship, morality and law, which I will examine briefly. Where should we draw the line between anarchy and morality? Although Salman Rushdie may have written a brilliant book, and, more importantly, raised necessary questions highly relevant in today’s plural society, he might have transgressed the boundaries of artistic freedom. To rephrase the above-mentioned

quotation from Doctorow: yes, good fiction should be interested in the moral fate of its people, and that is why an artist cannot write whatever he/she thinks. In deciding upon the fate of a literary work, one has, as Paul Vanderham puts it, to focus on “the benefits of a given artistic work against its adverse effects”, to analyse whether “the benefits of artistic freedom [...] outweigh the harm that such freedom may cause” (Vanderham: 144).

Rushdie’s aim was to present an alternative truth. Consequently, through *The Satanic Verses*, by a deconstruction of established principles, he aims to reach a synthesis of belief. By a deconstruction of absolutist religion, he presents the readers to the value of individual secular or religious experiences, and thus his focus is upon an alternative world, a world of compromise. Ironically then, when Khomeini, with his *fatwa*, ‘rallied the immigrant Muslim people of Europe to the banner of Islam’ as a defensive action against filth and blasphemy, what Rushdie attempted was to be a spokesman for the very same people and culture.

By claiming literary autonomy Rushdie insists that he had no intentions of causing insult to the Muslim community. In his own defence of *The Satanic Verses* he strongly maintains that:

I genuinely believed that my overt use of fabulation would make it clear to any reader that I was not attempting to falsify history, but to allow a fiction to take off from history [...] the use of fiction was a way of creating a sort of distance from actuality that I felt would prevent offence from being taken. (IGF: 17)

However, Rushdie’s defence undoubtedly seems naïve. Rushdie, having studied the history of Islam, and being familiar with Indian Muslim values and cultures, must have been aware of the impact his book might make. As Peter van den Veer observes, “‘Rushdie’s magic realism makes a raid on reality, but reality [ironically] hits back with a raid on fiction.’” (Ruthven: 28) By suggesting that human hands were involved in the

making of the Quran, he has (according to millions of Muslims across the world) committed the most serious of blasphemous acts. Malise Ruthven claims that millions of Muslims, radicals and liberals alike, “felt deeply pained by the book” (29). Some Muslims even considered Rushdie’s literary achievement a kind of rape, linking the whole case to the concept of honour and shame. The sexual imagery shows that there is a connection between faith and purity. The rage and hurt “proves that Rushdie has touched upon some very raw nerves in a community experiencing the very insecurities and dilemmas [of the shaping of identity through religion in a secular society] he portrays” (28).

It is not my aim to advocate the abolishment of freedom of expression, but merely to suggest a compromise and a more balanced view that will facilitate a broader understanding of this highly complex issue. It is an issue which is perhaps even more relevant today, more than a decade after the *fatwa*. As Lisa Appignanesi, the co-author of *The Rushdie File*, convincingly argues, we have to confront the issues that the Rushdie controversy has brought into the open, rather than “sweep them under the carpet, if we are to live peacefully together in a multi-cultural world” (Appignanesi: vii). It is easy to see that we are still sweeping these issues under the carpet. In our contemporary society, we are frequently facing related conflicts of religious and cultural concerns, reminding us about the increasing and unfortunate gap between the Muslim world and the West.

Most importantly, however, we need to confront *The Satanic Verses* itself. What is the textual evidence for the controversy? Why has it caused deaths, led to churches being destroyed, “disrupted billions of dollars in trade, brought profound cultural tensions to the surface, and finally, confronted ‘civilizations’” (16)? My aim with this thesis is to attempt to uncover the radical nature of *The Satanic Verses*, in order to illustrate its relevance to our contemporary society.

CHAPTER 1

Textual Reasons for Offence

The Satanic Verses – A Summary

The Satanic Verses is a vast and complex novel, describing the relationship between two friends, both Indian, both media people, and both living in modern Britain. Gibreel Farishta (Gabriel angel) and Saladin Chamcha get to know each other on the plane to Britain, and when the Air India jet is bombed by terrorists over London, Gibreel and Saladin miraculously survive. The novel starts *in medias res*, when the two protagonists literally come ‘flying’ down to earth, the ‘flight’ clearly representing ‘the fall’ and a new birth (SV: 73). Gibreel and Saladin survive to represent a symbolic angel and devil respectively.

Gibreel Farishta, a 40-year-old Indian film star, upset about his declining film career, is running away from his obligations in Bombay in order to search for his newfound love, the mountain climber Alleuia Cone. Gibreel, a man of the world, has become haunted and tormented by dreams and visions, while struggling with the loss of religious faith. Saladin Chamcha, the other protagonist, migrated to England early in life. All his life he has tried to escape from his Indianness, wanting to be a noble and proper Englishman, admiring British values over all others. Now he is returning to London after a theatrical season in India, during which his identity as a proper English gentleman has become difficult to sustain. Just like Gibreel, Saladin has been in the movie business but now he dubs commercials – a job where the audience can hear his voice, but not face his blackness. Saladin, just like his wealthy father, is thoroughly secular in his outlook.

After the two protagonists fall out of the plane, both Saladin and Gibreel have to start a new life, totally from scratch. They are in a transit lounge, much in the same position as that of the migrants, Saladin feeling like he would have to “invent the ground beneath his feet before he could take a step” (SV: 136). After the fall, Saladin, the secular person, acquires horns and hooves, like the devil himself, whereas Gibreel, the religious sceptic, starts wearing a halo. Both characters undergo several metamorphoses during their stay in London, all the time in search of their identity.

Throughout the novel the readers learn about the intense relationship between Gibreel and Saladin, as well as all there is to know about their sexual partners and how they interact with the society around them, which Rushdie subjects to severe criticism. Gibreel, through a series of dreams and visions, takes up the role as the archangel Gibreel, finding it quite easy as he has played various roles of deities before. The readers get inside his dreams, and see him entering the magical city of Jahilia (Mecca), where he sets about to reveal the new religion of Islam to the messenger Mahound (Muhammad). The readers also get to follow him through London, where he dreams that he is the Archangel Gibreel, and hovers around the city in order to rescue its fallen dwellers. Furthermore, in his dream he encounters a great imam, supposedly the Ayatollah Khomeini. Finally, Gibreel’s dreams take him to the shores of India, where he leads the extremely religious orphan girl, Ayesha, and her followers to their deaths, trying to cross the Arabian Sea by foot, expecting the waters to part.

Eventually, Gibreel, haunted by his visions, not knowing whether he is the devil or God, unable to distinguish between good and evil, turns almost schizophrenic and commits suicide. Saladin, on the other hand, survives, stronger and more optimistic, with a new perspective on life and love (Grant: 72). Despite the fact that he has undergone a severe mutation, appearing as the devil, with a stinking breath, an enormous, hairy body,

and has grown horns, he turns human again after reclaiming his identity as a British/Indian subject, a mixture of both traditions. One could say that he becomes more rooted, since he faces up to a more real version of the world. Although he has been the foremost symbol of evil throughout much of the novel, he acquires goodness by re-adopting his true identity “by a pure act of the will” (Cohn-Sherbook: 19).

Rushdie explores the themes of good and evil and defines the interaction between good and evil characters. In one of Gibreel’s dreams, Satan intervenes in the reception of the revealed text, ordering Mahound to include some controversial verses in the Quran. The confused Prophet Mahound experiences great difficulty in separating good from evil, e.g., the Devil from God, and the characters of Gibreel and Saladin constantly question themselves as to who they are; which is good and which is evil respectively.

The whole narrative unfolds through a system of flashbacks on a number of levels. By Rushdie’s clever use of time-travelling, the novel is divided into several parallel narratives, unravelling in contemporary London, seventh-century Arabia, twentieth-century Pakistan, in addition to far-away places such as Buenos Aires and Bombay. Through flashbacks the readers learn about Gibreel Farishta’s film career and the loss of faith which brings upon him a terrible isolation, as well as about his tragic affair with Rekha Merchant, the woman who after her death constantly appears as a ghost to haunt Gibreel. At the same time the readers hear about Saladin Chamcha, his denial of his Indianness, his English education and marriage, and how he used to “rule the airways of Britain” as a successful radio-voice (Grant: 73)

The novel is expansive in many senses, first of all geographically, since it deals with events in the cities of Bombay, London and Mecca. Secondly, it is expansive temporally, ranging from the seventh century to the twentieth, as well as philosophically,

by exploring a number of existential themes. Thirdly, it is culturally expansive, since it engages in various cultural experiences and traditions, and fourthly, it is expansive linguistically, since it uses six languages in its composition (Grant: 87).

The Satanic Verses is told in a third-person narrative and the narrator is often intrusive, continually commenting upon the story. The narrator is clearly omniscient, as 'he' sees every event that concerns the characters, as well as entering their dreams and describing their innermost thoughts, desires and motives. The intrusive and omniscient narrator, allegedly the Devil himself, frequently interrupts the narrative while pondering upon philosophical issues, asking himself who he is, what kind of idea he is.

Rushdie's extensive references to other texts, his citations and quotations, from William Blake, Shakespeare and Enoch Powell, among many, create a puzzle for the culturally illiterate. Consequently, in order to fully enjoy and comprehend what lies at the heart of the novel, the interested reader could benefit from bearing these other works in mind.

Text-Internal Factors Conflicting with Concepts of Honour

I will argue that *The Satanic Verses* strongly conflicts with the Muslim concept of honour. In order to grasp the depth of the controversy, it is therefore necessary to elaborate upon this issue. Why is the novel perceived as a kind of rape upon Muslim culture, as Malise Ruthven observes, as "a kind of child abuse in reverse"? (Ruthven: 29). According to Ruthven, many of the South Asian Muslims in Britain who violently protested against *The Satanic Verses* were former peasants and mountain men, particularly sensitive to appeals framed in terms of honour and tradition (Ruthven: 1) As he observes, "the 'honour of the Prophet' has meaning, as a focus for group allegiance

and identity in a society where they suffer discrimination” (162). Although to a Western reader the concept of honour and shame seems somewhat anachronistic, it is crucially important to the Muslim psyche. According to Unni Wikan, the term ‘honour’ holds an alluring, seductive appeal, and it “harks back to more glorious times when men were brave, honest and principled (Wikan: 231).

Many Muslims live by the terms ‘honour’ and ‘shame’. The concept of honour, defined by Pitt-Rivers as “the value of a person in his own eyes, [and] also in the eyes of society”, has to do with Muhammad’s “excellence recognized by society, his right to pride” (234). Undoubtedly, through his characters Rushdie transgresses powerful taboos that are linked to the concept of honour and shame. Firstly, when he lets his characters challenge and mock Muhammad, the patriarch himself, and in addition questions the role of women in what has been perceived as a disrespectful manner, he touches upon issues not usually discussed without due consideration. And secondly, he insults Muslim honour already in the title.

The Title

Although *The Satanic Verses* was perceived as only mildly provocative by Western audiences, there are quite clearly several text-internal factors that ridicule Islamic sanctities and interfere with honour and shame. Rushdie “attacked” the Quran already in the title. Consequently, despite the fact that many of his opponents never even had read the novel (mostly because they did not have access to the book), the mere title was enough to condemn him. The response of Syed Shahabuddin, the MP in India who raised the whole controversy, illustrates the issue: ““I have not read it, nor do I intend to. I do not have to wade through a filthy drain to know what filth is”” (Appignanesi: 4).

Rushdie was undoubtedly deeply frustrated, knowing that those who went into the streets in order to burn the book were talking about a book that, according to himself, “did not exist” (IGF: 4). How could the mere title of a book instigate such havoc?

According to some commentators, the title included “all the deadly connotations of the affair” since it associated “the devil with the sacred” (Braziller: 2). Thus, already initially, the title indicated a sacrilegious intention. The very title itself became “the proof and the symbol of the whole affair” (2). In his defence of the title, however, Rushdie denies any sacrilegious intention by claiming that he wanted to reverse the offensive meaning:

You call us devils? It seems to ask. Very well, then, here is the devil’s version of the world, of ‘your’ world, the version written *from the experience* of those who have been demonized by virtue of their otherness. Just as the Asian kids in the novel wear toy devil-horns proudly, as an assertion of pride in identity, so the novel proudly wears its demonic title. The purpose is not to suggest that the Qur’an is written by the devil; it is to attempt the sort of act of affirmation that, in the United States, transformed the word Black from the standard term of racist abuse into a ‘beautiful’ expression of cultural pride. (IGF: 12)

Although Rushdie insists that by using this particular title, he attempted to reclaim language from one’s opponents, in an act of turning insult into strengths, Muslims by and large; even moderates who supported him on the grounds of artistic freedom recognized the provocativeness of the title (11). Rushdie insists that the phrase ‘Satanic verses’ is familiar to most Muslims, and that he has taken the title from At-Tabari, one of the canonical Islamic sources. According to Daniel Pipes, however, At-Tabari’s phrase was similar but not identical (Pipes: 115). Pipes claims that the abrogated lines of the Satanic verses, ““These are the exalted birds/And their intercession is desired indeed,”” is known to Muslims “as the *gharaniq* incident” (gharaniq referring to birds), not the Satanic verses incident as Rushdie claims (115). Thus, the phrase “Satanic verses” is unfamiliar to Muslims, who most likely have no idea of what Rushdie is referring to (115).

Pipes claims that the phrase has its origin in the Orientalist tradition, and was first used by William Muir in his book *The Life of Mahomet* (1861) (Pipes: 115). This is a particularly revealing observation. By using the title ‘The Satanic Verses’, Rushdie at the same time placed himself partly within an Orientalist tradition, something which has not gone unnoticed. As Syed Ali Ashraf commented “‘He [Rushdie] sides with the Orientalists.’” (116) Thus, intentionally or not, Rushdie’s title was by many understood as “The Satanic Quran”, and it became an issue of blasphemy since Rushdie seemed to suggest that the Quran was the work of the Devil (117). Such an interpretation was spelt out by a British convert to Islam, Yaqub Zaki, who claimed that:

Rushdie’s use of the name of the devil responsible for the fraud is intended to indicate that the whole Koran is fraudulent and Muhammad a mean imposter, not a question of two verses spotted as such but all the 6,236 verses making up the entire book. In other words, the title is a *double entendre*. (Pipes: 117)

Despite the fact that Rushdie hardly implies that the Quran comes from the devil, his ambiguity is sometimes difficult to grasp. Thus, understandably, millions of Muslims perceived the title as having a double meaning. One can merely speculate about what the novel’s fate might have been if Rushdie had selected another title.

The Holy Quran and the Prophet

According to Malise Ruthven, *The Satanic Verses* “mounted a twofold challenge to the Almighty”, by attacking the sacred text itself as well as the Prophet (Ruthven: 7). Not only did the novel challenge the absolute authority and authenticity of the Quran (to most Muslims “literally a part of the Godhead”, by suggesting that Satan had interfered in the revelation of the holy scripture), but furthermore, by satirizing Muhammad, picturing

him in a brothel as a conman, the novel questioned the moral integrity of a man revered almost as God (7).

Ruthven claims that “the Qur’an and the figure of the Prophet are deeply implicated in the communal *izzat*”,⁹ and an attack on the sacred text and the holy Prophet was perceived as an attack

On the honour of the whole [Muslim] community – a community whose collective image of itself, forged in the relatively hostile milieu of the subcontinent, required a greater than average dependence on Muslim shibboleths. (8)

By raising doubts about the divine source of the Quran, Rushdie was seen to imply that the entire sacred text, and consequently Muslim life, had a fraudulent basis. Eickelman states that the notion of Muslim communal solidarity and of social justice has been inspired by the Quran and “the sayings (*hadiths*) of the Prophet”, as well as an obligation to authority who expresses ideas and values through abstract symbols (for instance, the Prophet as a symbol of morality, the veil as a Muslim identity marker) in order to create an image of an ideal Muslim society (Eickelman: 21). Clearly, if communal solidarity – the ties that bind - is based on the Quran, any interfering with the sacred text can gradually alter the feeling of communal solidarity, particularly among the younger generation, and thus break down the *umma*, the Muslim community. The notion of communal solidarity has become crucial as many Muslims, experiencing the modernity of the West as vulgar and excessive, have felt the need to distance themselves from certain elements of modern society and instead seek an ideal built on the framework of the Quran.

One of the central features of the Islamic faith is that the Quran is the exact word of God. The Quran is thought of as “the Uncreated Word of God – an intrinsic part [...] of

⁹ ‘Izzat’ meaning ‘honour’

the Divine Essence” (Ruthven: 8). As Daniel Pipes observes, in Judaism, the central feature is the covenant between Abraham and God, in Christianity the central tenet is that Jesus is the son of God (although quite a few Christian sects show the same reverence for the holy scriptures as do orthodox Muslims), whereas in the Islamic faith it is the *book* itself which is the most essential tenet (Pipes: 56). Thus, as he claims, no Muslim may question the authenticity of the Quran, since this is to raise doubts “about the validity of the faith itself [...] usually seen as an act of apostasy” (56).

Despite the fact that most Muslims are broad-minded about many things, many are reluctant to question religious issues. Strictly speaking, religion is not just a part of life for many Muslims; life is rather a part of religion. An Arab proverb illustrates the seriousness of the religious issue: “Kill me, but do not mock my faith” (Appignanesi: 93). Amir Taheri, an Iranian journalist, illustrates the reverence for the Quran and the written word by claiming that:

Islam is the religion of the book *par excellence*. Few cultures hold the written and printed word in so much respectful awe as Muslims, even though the vast majority are illiterate. When a Muslim wants to clinch an argument he says, ‘It is written’. (94)

It is tempting to speculate that it is precisely because “the vast majority are illiterate” that this type of veneration is so prevalent in society. However, the Muslim world has not experienced a tradition of higher criticism, based on anything equivalent to the Western Enlightenment philosophy, claiming “that all views should be expressed, particularly those touching on religion”, with the result that most Muslim subjects have been reluctant to analyse or challenge sacred texts (Pipes: 211). As Edward Said observes, the

Gradual disappearance of the extraordinary tradition of Islamic *ijtihad* has been one of the major cultural disasters of our time, with the result that critical thinking and individual wrestling with the problems of the modern world have simply dropped out of sight. Orthodoxy and dogma rule instead.¹⁰ (Said: xxviii)

Many Muslim scholars and writers have raised questions about the divinity and relevance of the Quran. In his book *The Book and the Qur'an: A contemporary reading* (1992), for instance, the Syrian civil engineer Muhammad Shahrur calls for a constant and open reinterpretation of sacred texts in order to make them harmonise with contemporary society. Much in accordance with Rushdie's project, Shahrur argued that if Islam was to be a sound religion for all times and places, Muslims could not "neglect historical developments and the interaction of different generations" (Eickelman: 155). A Kuwaiti bookseller argued that Shahrur's book was more dangerous than Rushdie's novel. The publication of this book, however, hardly caused uproar of the same scale (156). Rushdie's timing, which I will discuss briefly below, and the fact that he was a (former) Muslim, living in a Western country, probably made a crucial difference.

The questioning of the Quran was serious enough in itself, but the readers also come across several insulting descriptions of Muhammad, or Mahound in the novel, such as his temptations and his manipulative nature. Rushdie insists however, that his way of portraying Muhammad was not in order to degrade him, but merely to make him more vivid and "even more worthy of admiration" (IGF: 18). As he claims, even "the greatest human beings must struggle against themselves as well as the world" (IGF: 18). Clearly, he is right about the latter, but given the veneration of Muhammad, how could he

¹⁰ The Islamic tradition of *ijtihad* means independent judgment. Muslim jurists have had a tradition of exercising independent judgment in order to add, emend or slightly change aspects of the divinely revealed law (for instance, make legal reforms), and to some extent one can perhaps compare this tradition with the tradition of higher criticism. Emendations and additions have occurred throughout Islamic history, particularly since the mid-nineteenth century, but today most Muslim jurists claim there can be no more change, thus, 'closing the door to *ijtihad*. (Eickelman: 26)

possibly think that Muslims would accept his portrayal of the Prophet as a lustful and seemingly manipulative character?

It is not difficult to apprehend the seriousness of Rushdie's treatment of Muhammad if we consider the Muslim mindset. Although Rushdie hardly treated his fictional figure in the same manner as the Crusaders treated the sacred Prophet, merely the invocation of this name 'Mahound', carrying extremely negative connotations, was highly provocative. For Muslims, "rooted in the culture of veneration, with its naïve celebration of childhood archetypes, the name Mahound is [...] insulting" (Ruthven: 36). Ruthven claims that

Rushdie's use of the name for the Prophet [...] challenges, or perhaps exorcises, a [...] mythic archetype lodged in the Muslim psyche. Mahound – with his variants Mahum, Mahun, Mahoune, Macon, Machound and so forth – is a medieval European version of Muhammad, whom Christians presumed the infidel Muslims worshipped as God. (Ruthven: 35)

Rushdie's justification for his use of the name 'Mahound' is interesting. As already mentioned, Rushdie was, according to himself, engaged in an act "of reclaiming language from one's opponents" (IGF: 11). He insists that by adopting the insulting names, one symbolically conquers one's captors and eventually becomes free. Thus, he attempted

'To turn insult into strengths, whigs, tories, Blacks all chose to wear with pride the names they were given in scorn: likewise, our mountain-climbing, prophet-motivated solitary is to be the medieval baby-frightener, the Devil's synonym: Mahound.' (IGF: 11)

Although Rushdie has a plausible point, I will argue that even when defending his use of the name Mahound, one can spot a certain sarcasm and ambiguity. 'Mountain-climbing, prophet-motivated'? Does this sound like a description of a sincere Prophet? Although one can argue that the term 'mountain-climbing' is quite simply Rushdie's way of using language rationally, the term 'prophet-motivated' is more difficult to defend. Firstly, one

who pays respect to the Prophet always uses a capital 'p' when referring to the Prophet. Secondly, the term 'motivated' is often associated with motives of gain. Could Rushdie not have used the term 'Prophet' if his aim were merely to rationalise? Apparently, even in his own defence, Rushdie's ambivalence toward the Prophet comes to the surface.

By "abusing" Muhammad, Rushdie was likely to cause maximum insult. Malise Ruthven claims that "the reverence accorded to the Prophet in many traditions is only a degree below deification", particularly in "Muslim communities of the Indian subcontinent, the principal source of the campaign against *The Satanic Verses* until Khomeini issued his famous *fatwa*" (Ruthven: 31). Although Muhammad himself explicitly ordered his followers not to worship him, since he was only "a warner, and a bearer of good tidings, to a people believing", this seems to have been honoured only partly (31). Rushdie himself maintains that whereas the Quran is a sacred text, Muhammad was no deity. According to Rushdie, he was probably "one of the great geniuses of world history, a successful businessman, victorious general and sophisticated statesman as well as a prophet", but he was nevertheless only a messenger (Appignanesi: 74). Tariq Ramadan, a teacher of philosophy and Islamic studies, agrees with Rushdie on this particular issue. He concedes to the fact that Muhammad was "nothing but a man, with noble qualities certainly, but a man, just as we are" (Ramadan: 13). However, as he insists, although Muhammad was a normal man and a mortal, he was chosen by God "to be the paragon of virtue", precisely because he had the finest qualities and manners (14).

The nature of Muhammad's prophet-hood is a complex issue indeed, and when Rushdie takes upon himself the task of discussing it, he naturally faces problems. If the messenger was just an ordinary man, and likewise, "if the angel Gabriel, the Messenger's messenger", a very holy figure to Muslims, was not a true messenger, how then can the message be true (Ruthven: 138)? Obviously, as Anwar, a Pakistani teacher in England

claims, “‘any twisting or any distortion of [these] characters [will] be seen as an attempt to falsify the scriptures’” (138).

As mentioned, several of the offensive text-internal factors in *The Satanic Verses* conflict with the Muslim concept of honour and shame. As Dr. Zaki Badawi, head of the Muslim College in Ealing, insists, “‘What he [Rushdie] has written is far worse to Muslims than if he had raped one’s own daughter,’” (29). Some Muslims even compared the novel to “a kind of child abuse in reverse”, consequently, a kind of rape (29).

‘It’s as if Rushdie had composed a brilliant poem about the private parts of his parents, and then gone to the market place to recite that poem to the applause of strangers, who invariably laughed at the jokes he cracks about his parent’s genitalia – and he’s taking money for doing it.’ (29)

According to Ruthven, “the sexual imagery is significant,” because it reveals “the essential connection between faith and purity” (29). The connection between faith and sexuality is strongly embedded in Islamic cultures, perhaps more than in other cultures (30). The divine is linked to the sexual. Rules and sanctions for sexual behaviour are therefore highly important, and the only way to reproduce a sound and healthy society, is through “proper” conduct. Proper conduct again, can be viewed through the Prophet Muhammad, who as mentioned, is “the model for mankind” (Appignanesi: 48). Any “infringement on the rules of conduct, of the ideologically dominant code of honour and shame”, is bound to cause reaction (Ruthven: 73, 74). As Ruthven states, quoting Gilsenan, “honour and shame, purity and pollution are vital concerns of life” (74).

Whereas the Quran literally is God’s word, envisioning a cosmic order, of patriarchy and a “radical polarity of the sexes”, a “guide” of how to organize society, Muhammad is viewed as *the* patriarch, the embodiment of a perfect, sinless and honourable man (Ruthven: 6-7). The worship of the Prophet can only be understood

properly if we look at the myths and legendary tales surrendering him. As Ruthven observes, Muhammad seems to be perfect in every possible way. His

Moral perfections are matched by his physical beauty and the absence of all physical impurities. He was born fully circumcised. The earth swallowed up his excrement; more acceptable body products like hairs and nail-clippings were collected as talismans. His shirt was enough to cure a Jew's blindness; the fragrance of his presence was such that it left its beautiful odour of musk around those to whom he appeared in dreams (and that, of course, included just about anyone with serious claims to holiness). (32)

According to Badawi, pious Muslims keep the Prophet in their heart (29). From the earliest times, mainstream Sunni Islam¹¹ has been involved in an extravagant “Muhammadolatry” (33, 34). Pious Sunnis have tried to “model their lives on that of the Prophet” and therefore “an assault on his reputation is perceived as an assault on the Muslim personality” (34, 35). Ruthven maintains that,

Every detail of his life, down to the cut of his beard, the clothes he wore, the food he liked, became in the formative period of Islamic culture (the eight and ninth centuries CE) the ideal for a whole civilisation. (34)

As a consequence of the veneration of the Prophet, Islam has, more than any other religion, become patriarchal, and “sexual transgressions – the sin of *zina* or fornication – are crimes against God, punishable by death” (30). As Ruthven observes:

In essence, though marriage is not a sacrament as in Christianity, there exists a fusion of the sexual and the sacred in Islam that is all the more powerful because it reinforces a social code rooted in Mediterranean and Asian values of honour and shame. (30)

Ruthven claims that one must acknowledge the fact that any link between sexual impropriety and the Prophet evidently leads to outrage (31). Muslims who are brought up

¹¹ 90% of the world's Muslims are Sunnis

to cherish the Prophet as a divinity safely “cocooned in the realm of *al ghaib*”, that is, the realms of the hidden or esoteric, known fully only to God, (and therefore not a theme for the ordinary man) obviously fiercely object to Rushdie describing the Prophet as an ordinary man, and moreover, in a filthy language which links him to sexual acts (31).

The Satanic Verses categorically explores Mahound’s sexuality, and thus Rushdie seems to play with those aspects of Arabic and Asian culture which Edward Said has called ‘Orientalism’, and which I will return to later. Firstly, the readers are introduced to all the prostitutes who have taken on the names of the Prophet’s wives. Secondly, the poet Baal, who resides in the brothel, ‘marries’ the prostitutes, and while acting out the role of the Prophet, makes love to them all. Finally, the readers observe the Prophet while waking up in Hind’s bed, naked among the silky sheets, not knowing how he got there (SV: 122).

He recognizes Hind’s voice, sits up, and finds himself naked beneath the creamy sheet. He calls to her: ‘Was I attacked?’ Hind turns to him, smiling her Hind smile. ‘Attacked, she mimics him, and claps her hands for breakfast. [...] She comes and sits close to him on the bed, extends a finger, finds the gap in his robe, strokes his chest. ‘Fainted,’ she murmurs. ‘That’s weakness, Mahound. Are you becoming weak?’ (SV: 122,123)

Despite the fact that Mahound appears innocent as to the charges of sexual conduct, Rushdie’s subtle hints leave the readers in doubt. Furthermore, I will argue that Rushdie causes a slight affront by positioning Mahound as weak and seemingly completely in Hind’s power. After all, Hind is a female contestant for power and the Prophet’s adversary. Finally, Rushdie’s filthy street-language, used in order to describe, or hint at sexuality, adds to the suspicion. The terms ‘fucking’ and ‘sucking’, as well as Mahound being allowed to “fuck as many women as he liked”, along with the description of Mahound wrestling with the archangel, “he’s getting in everywhere, his tongue in my ear his fist around my balls”, are sexually loaded and thus perceived as offensive, conflicting

with the concept of honour (SV: 125). Given the account that Muhammad is almost a figure of God, one can understand that Rushdie was seen to enter “the sacral space Muhammad occupies in Muslim feeling and affection” (Ruthven: 31). According to Ruthven, it is precisely this entry which is perceived as a kind of rape, a grave violation, a dishonouring of the Prophet (31).

In line with his project of challenging the nature of man and his dispositions, and of questioning the strict boundary between purity and impurity, Rushdie lets his character Salman the Persian, repeatedly question the morality of the Prophet in order to illustrate that he is nothing but an ordinary man. In the novel the readers hear how Salman, recounting a quarrel between Ayesha (Muhammad’s favourite wife) and Mahound, explicitly confirms Mahound’s lustfulness and immorality:

‘That girl couldn’t stomach it that her husband wanted so many other women [...] ‘He talked about necessity, political alliances and so on, but she wasn’t fooled. Who can blame her? Finally, he went into - what else - one of his trances, and out he came with a message from the archangel. Gibreel had recited verses giving him full divine support. God’s own permission to fuck as many women as he liked. So there: what could poor Ayesha say against the verses of God? (SV: 398)

The Prophet is not only described as sexually immoral, but, as John Walsh claims, as an “unscrupulous and manipulative hoodwinker of his flock” (Appignanesi: 32). Particularly in the incident of the Satanic verses, the most controversial issue in the novel, the readers are warned about the Prophet’s manipulative nature.

The Satanic Verses Incident and the Nature of Revelation

Of all text-internal factors that caused offence, no single incident raised more controversy than the incident of the Satanic verses. Rushdie claims that the purpose of his use of this incident was to examine “the nature of revelation and the power of faith”, to “try to understand the human event of revelation” (IGF: 17). Moreover, he wanted to explore the role of mysticism, as well as how the conscious and unconscious personality interact (17). In doing so, Rushdie uses dream sequences precisely in order to examine the interconnection between the unconscious and the conscious. What is reality and myth respectively? And on what do we base our identity? Finally, is there a distinction between God and the devil (12)?

The Satanic verses incident needs to be examined at some length, both in relation to the historical record and to Rushdie’s treatment of the episode. Historically, it is important to recognise that Mecca, or Jahilia in the novel, was a place of polytheistic worship at the time of Muhammad’s arrival. The leading tribe of Mecca, the Quraysh (in the novel the Sharks, with the negative association of greed, hunger) and the town’s prosperity depended greatly on its role as a religious centre, since the worshippers were paying tributes to the hundreds of idols. Obviously, Muhammad posed a real threat to the existing order since his new religion emphasised monotheism (Pipes: 56, 57).

Thus, according to some historians, when leading members of the Quraysh tribe whispered to Muhammad that he would benefit if he were to include some of the most important goddesses of Mecca in his new religion, or more precisely, take a flexible attitude to their idols in order to gain converts, Muhammad was tempted, and it is precisely this temptation that Rushdie sets out to explore, by asking the essential questions: When you are weak, do you compromise? And next, when you are strong, are you tolerant? Rushdie’s philosophical probing is not a deliberate attempt to destroy

religious faith, nor to attack Islam in general, but, I will argue, to explore the human condition; or more indirectly, to examine how the migrant acts when adjusting to new environments.

Those who verify the authenticity of the Satanic verses incident claim that it took place in about A.D. 614. Ruthven observes that Rushdie, by using this incident, goes right to “the heart of the dogma that Muhammad’s role in revelation was purely passive, like a ‘telephone, a mindless instrument that could in no way interfere with the transmission of the text’” (Ruthven: 40). This is a very interesting observation indeed. Clearly, Rushdie’s satire challenges this doctrine, a “fundamentalist dogma of an ‘uncreated’ Qur’an”, by portraying Mahound as a calculating businessman, bargaining with the archangel in order to make him accept three female goddesses (40).

At-Tabari claimed that Muhammad, at the time of the Satanic verses incident, “hoped in his soul for something from God to bring him and his tribe together” (Pipes: 57). Being extremely frustrated and bearing the Grandee’s offer in mind, Mahound struggles with temptation while trying to get his followers’ acceptance.

‘It’s a small matter,’ he begins [...]. ‘A grain of sand. Abu Simbel asks Allah to grant him one little favour.’ [...] ‘If our great God could find it in his heart to concede – [...] that three, only three of the three hundred and sixty idols in the house are worthy of worship...’ [...] he gives his guarantee that we will be tolerated, even officially recognized; as a mark of which, I am to be elected to the council of Jahilia. That’s the offer.’ (SV: 108)

Mahound’s flock, seeing the offer as a trap, sincerely worry that no one will ever take them seriously again if Mahound is to accept. To this, Mahound replies:

‘Maybe you haven’t been here long enough,’ he says kindly. ‘Haven’t you noticed? The people do not take us seriously. Never more than fifty in the audience when I speak, and half of those are tourists. (SV: 108)

Mahound tries to convince his followers that he must make it easier for people to believe, thus showing an inclination to accept the offer (109). He denies the seriousness of the issue, after all these three goddesses are only to be given a small, intermediary status between Allah and man - they will not be accepted as Allah's equals (109). Clearly we hear the talk of a business man, bargaining among various alternatives.

Thereafter, Rushdie's fictional Prophet climbs the mountain to receive God's answer, hoping it will prove beneficial, but clearly struggling with his conscience.

O my vanity, I am an arrogant man, is this weakness, is it just a dream of power? Must I betray myself for a seat on the council? (SV: 113)

While reflecting upon the personality of the Grandee Abu Simpel, his potential "business-partner", Mahound ponders on the issue of strong versus weak, and whether to settle for a compromise.

I am weak and he's strong, the offer gives him many ways of ruining me. But I too, have much to gain. The souls of the city, of the world, surely they are worth three angels? Is Allah so unbending that he will not embrace three more to save the human race? (SV: 113)

After having received an answer from the archangel, very well timed indeed, Mahound descends from the mountain and recites what has become known as the Satanic verses. Without any hesitation, the Prophet embraces three of the most prominent Meccan goddesses into Islam:

'Have you thought upon Lat and Uzza, and Manat, the third, the other?' [...] 'They are the exalted birds, and their intercession is desired indeed.' (SV: 117)

Although Mahound momentarily accepts the verses, in his vulnerable situation, settling for a compromise, he eventually finds out about Satan's interference in the revelation and abrogates the verses. By exploring this incident, Rushdie made (at least according to countless Muslims) several mistakes. Firstly, by suggesting that some female goddesses were Allah's equals, Rushdie insulted millions of Muslims who tend to favour male superiority above all. Bearing in mind the concept of honour and shame, it is easy to recognise the insult. After all, by granting Allah daughters, when the men in Muslim societies ought to have sons, would easily be seen as an act of dishonouring Allah. According to Ruthven, by portraying Satan as interpolating these particular verses in the scripture, Rushdie challenges the authority of the Quran "in the name of the female principle, represented by the pagan goddesses of Mecca, Allat, al-Uzzat and al-Manat" (Ruthven: 7).

Secondly, Rushdie opened old wounds. The incident is clearly disputed. There have been a number of debates on the topic, and a few Islamic scholars of the Quran accept the story. However, most scholars repudiate it since they regard "the chain of transmitters (*isnad*) linking it to the Prophet" as too weak (38). They claim that the story is a fabrication created by unbelievers in the early days of Islam, and thus, the verses are not included in the *hadiths* collected after Muhammad's death, but are denounced as 'satanic' (38). Furthermore, most Muslims familiar with this controversial incident are reluctant to be reminded of it.

Thirdly, by treating this incident, Rushdie challenged the nature of revelation, which, it seems, was part of his project exactly. If Satan interfered once, could he not have done so several times? How do we know who spoke the sacred words? Who is the angel and the devil respectively? Rushdie, by reworking this incident, brings forth the issue of good versus evil in order to illustrate that there is no clear-cut division between

the two. After Mahound expunges the foul verses, realizing that they came from the devil, the readers learn what Gibreel, in his role as the archangel, thinks about the matter:

Gibreel, hovering-watching from his highest camera angle, knows one small detail, just one tiny thing that's a bit of a problem here, namely that *it was me both times, baba, me first and second also me*. From my mouth, both the statement and the repudiation, verses and converses, universes and reverses, the whole thing, and we all know how my mouth got worked. (SV: 126)

“How my mouth got worked”? Do we here have an example of Mahound manipulating the archangel? Surely, at this point it is suggested to the readers that Gibreel is being forced to say what he does to Mahound. Or is it Rushdie merely illustrating that any revelation is suspect, since we have no way of knowing whether the voices we hear through our ‘visions’ come from our external or internal self, or more interestingly, are voices inspired by God or the devil?

Fehti Benslama, in her essay “Rushdie, or the Textual Question”, observes that for those who claim the “uncreated origin of the Koran [sic]”, obviously such an episode as the Satanic verses could not have occurred. To those who denied the notion of an uncreated Quran, however, claiming it was created by divine-human construction, it was more likely to have occurred (Braziller: 85). There is much disagreement among Muslims about this issue, which again reminds us that although there was violent protest towards the novel, many Muslims were indifferent.

The incident of the Satanic verses is indeed controversial, but according to Rushdie, it was an important enquiry into human nature. As mentioned, he asked some very fundamental questions. Firstly, when you are weak, do you compromise? Mahound seems to be the “most pragmatic of Prophets” (SV: 393). In the incident of the Satanic verses, the readers experience a man who struggles with temptation and eventually

succumbs and compromises. However, Mahound regains strength when repudiating the verses. Thus follows Rushdie's second question: When you are strong, are you tolerant? Mahound does indeed show an act of tolerance at first, by sparing the people of Jahilia. However, he expresses utter ruthlessness when he beheads the whores and the poet Baal, claiming that the latter has dishonoured his house as well as "mocked the Recitation" (404). Just before his execution, Baal shouts to Mahound: "'Whores and writers, Mahound. We are the people you can't forgive.'" (405). Mahound replies interestingly: "'Writers and whores. I see no difference here.'" (405). This is Rushdie dramatising the ongoing battle between the individual and authority. As he seems to see it, it is a battle between creative imagination and passive theory, between energy, desire and impurity and static and total purity.

Rushdie claims that we are deceived if we look upon the Prophet as infallible. Thus, he describes Mahound both as an evil-doer and a provider of good tidings. The readers are introduced to a man who stubbornly chose "the path of purity", not "that of base compromise" (SV: 281). Mahound compromised only when he was weak. When he became strong, the unchallenged leader of the faithful, he showed sheer intolerance.

According to Rushdie, apart from challenging the nature of revelation while exploring the Satanic verses incident, he wanted to highlight "the importance and power of women" (Cundy: 67). Through the water carrier Khalid, Rushdie points out that the goddesses were rejected merely because they were female. Khalid serves as a perfect representative of what Rushdie seems to regard as Islamic male chauvinism, desperately uttering: "'Lat, Manat, Uzza – they're all *females*! For pity's sake! Are we to have goddesses now?'" (SV: 110).

The Satanic Verses questions the nature of revelation throughout the whole novel, sometimes explicitly, at other times through subtle satire. Firstly, the novel dramatises the medieval Christian ideas about Muhammad, namely that he received his revelations through epileptic fits.

It happens; revelation. Like this: Mahound, still in his notsleep, becomes rigid, veins bulge in his neck, he clutches at his centre. No, no, nothing like an epileptic fit, it can't be explained away that easily: what epileptic fit ever caused day to turn to night, caused clouds to mass overhead, caused the air to thicken into soup while an angel hung, scared silly, in the sky above the sufferer, held up like a kite on a golden thread? (SV: 114)

Even though the novel apparently rejects the ideas of Muhammad as receiving the revelations through epileptic fits, I will argue that this denial has a reverse effect. Clearly the mere act of mentioning epilepsy, and as such referring to the medieval Christian notion about Muhammad, indicates Rushdie's ambivalence towards the revelation. What adds to the suspicion, is Rushdie's mentioning of epilepsy a second time. In Chapter IV, "Ayesha", the readers are presented to Ayesha, who claims that she receives a message from the messenger Gibreel via "the tunes of popular hit songs" (SV: 232, 512).

Interestingly, Rushdie links the sexual with the sacred. The readers are not only introduced to an almost comical angel, familiar with popular hit songs, but Rushdie also suggests that the angel has had sexual intercourse with Ayesha, which is rather astounding. Gibreel, again appearing in his dream as the archangel Gibreel, frustratingly denies Ayesha's claims, however, not knowing from where the girl gets her information:

I never laid a finger on her, what do you think this is, some kind of wet dream or what? Damn me if I know from where that girl was getting her information/inspiration. Not from this quarter, that's for sure. (SV: 232)

Rushdie questions Ayesha's vision, suggesting that it is all in her imagination. Maybe revelations are just wishful dreams, linked to the sexual? Maybe Ayesha was promiscuous and justified her action by pretending to have received revelations? Pipes claims that Rushdie's criticism of the revelations "recalls the polemics of medieval Christian writers", who "made much of Muhammad happening to get revelations at convenient moments" (Pipes: 64). He quotes Norman Daniel, who has neatly observed "the triple reproach at the heart of their accusations against Muhammad" (64).

'Muhammad was promiscuous, and he justified himself by pretending to revelations, which he then erected into general laws for the benefit of his followers.' (64)

Rushdie seems to challenge the nature of revelation by portraying Mahound as a man who asks just as much as he listens. When Gibreel in his dream "listens to the listening-which-is-also-an-asking", the novel is presenting Mahound as a man who makes deals with the Archangel in order to achieve his goals (SV: 112).

Salman the Persian also asks why God sounds so much like a businessman. In Gibreel's dreams Salman recalls that

Mahound himself had been a businessman, and a damn successful one at that, a person to whom organization and rules came naturally, so how excessively convenient it was that he should have come up with such a very businesslike archangel, who handed down the management decisions of this highly corporate, if non-corporeal, God. (SV: 376)

This paragraph is not only burdened with sarcasm, but again conflicts with the concept of honour. In my view it dishonours the Prophet by reducing him to a mere businessman. Furthermore, by implying that the revelation was nothing but a commercial enterprise, it also dishonours God himself, and by doing so, mock the faithful for believing in him. When Salman also questions why the archangel always supports Mahound's views on

any subject what so ever, and that his revelations are so well timed, Rushdie seems to use his fictional figure in order to show a general suspicion towards the Prophet and his intentions (SV: 376-377). Shabbir Akhtar claims that Salman must have been created as a fictional figure “specifically to parody the principles of Islam”, and this is a plausible claim (Cohn-Sherbok: 10).¹² Salman the Persian expresses a profound scepticism and cynicism toward the Prophet, by questioning his actions and motives all throughout the more controversial chapters. Finally, what makes him permanently deny his faith is when he realises that Mahound overlooks his own alterations of the sacred text:

Little things at first. If Mahound recited a verse in which God was described as *all-hearing, all-knowing*, I would write, *all-knowing, all-wise*. Here’s the point: Mahound did not notice the alterations. So there I was, actually writing the Book, or rewriting, any-way, polluting the word of God with my own profane language. But, good heavens, if my poor words could not be distinguished from the Revelation by God’s own Messenger, then what did that mean? What did that say about the quality of divine poetry? [...] It’s one thing to be a smart bastard and have half-suspensions about funny business, but it’s quite another thing to find out that you’re right. (SV: 379-380)

Undoubtedly, Rushdie’s speculation into the nature of revelation affects the readers, who might, as Salman the Persian himself, hold divine poetry up for questioning. Rushdie lets Salman admit to acts of forgery and fraud, claiming that he was right about the ‘funny business’ going on, that there was no true revelation. This is indeed quite astounding. However, Rushdie is ambiguous, for indeed, Mahound does find out about the alterations, summons Salman and condemns him for his crime: ““Your blasphemy, Salman, can’t be forgiven. Did you think I wouldn’t work it out? To set your words against the Words of God.”” (SV: 387)

What kind of authority does this statement have? Can we as readers detect Rushdie’s authorial stance? I will argue that there is reason to believe that Rushdie’s

¹² The statement is taken from Shabbir Akhtar’s essay “Art or Literary Terrorism”, in Cohn-Sherbok, p. 1-23

views are clearly present within the text, and that he is adopting the character of Salman the Persian to get his views of blasphemy across. Through his characters, Rushdie repeatedly focuses upon blasphemous acts, and also in his essay 'In Good Faith', he discusses the topic. *The Satanic Verses* portrays Gibreel in his adolescence, comparing his own conditions with the Prophet's, dreaming about women, fully aware that he was "in the act of forming blasphemous thoughts" (SV: 22). Likewise, in the novel, in the case of the notorious brothel scene, which I will discuss below, Rushdie seems aware of the fact that he is dangerously transgressive. Finally, when Mahound realises that the poet Baal has taken refuge in the brothel where he has engaged in sexual activities, he issues a *fatwa*, which, I will argue, proves that Rushdie is fully aware of the blasphemy he is committing. Rushdie, however, denies the charges of blasphemy, claiming that he is no Muslim¹³, and thus firmly believes that "where there is no belief, there is no blasphemy" (IGF: 14).

The Brothel Scene and the *Shari'a*

The notorious brothel scene ranks high in offensiveness. Most Muslim groups¹⁴ have fiercely denounced it, claiming that Rushdie portrays Muhammad's wives as whores. According to Rushdie, however, he used this scene in order to "dramatize certain ideas about morality [...] and sexuality", actually, I will argue, a necessary and justified project. But as already established, we are dealing with conflicting perspectives. To a firm believer, the scene is clearly blasphemous. It disgraces Muhammad's wives, and

¹³ Now he apparently is, as confirmed in his essay 'Why I have embraced Islam', in *Imaginary Homelands*. However, there are indications that he has later dismissed this stance.

¹⁴ Although many Muslim groups violently protested the novel, others remained indifferent. Across the Muslim world, there are huge differences in how they received the novel.

thus we have an example of both honour and shame, since Muhammad is dishonoured because his wives are disgraced¹⁵ (IGF: 10, 11).

In Gibreel's dreams the readers hear about the brothel called 'The Curtain'¹⁶, where prostitutes take up the names of Mahound's wives and act out the fantasies of the faithless Jahilites. *The Satanic Verses* describes quite explicitly how and why the prostitutes assume the identities of the Prophet's wives. By linking sexual acts with the divine, the result could be a profitable commercial enterprise. While discussing clients, one of the girls comes up with the idea:

How many wives? Twelve, and one old lady, long dead. How many whores behind the curtain? Twelve again; and, secret on her black-tented throne, the ancient Madam, still defying death. Where there is no belief, there is no blasphemy. Baal told the Madam of his idea; she settled matters in her voice [...] 'It is very dangerous,' [...] 'but it could be damn good for business. (SV: 392-393)

The whole thing proved to be 'damn good for business' indeed. The novel lets us know that "The Curtain experienced a three hundred per cent increase in business", that Baal, the agent of impurity was satisfied, and that the men of Jahilia could think about nothing else but the 'wives' of the Prophet (393, 394). Ruthven claims that the brothel scene contains "a strong feminist undercurrent" (Ruthven: 25). By hearing about the Prophet's numerous marriages, and reading about the various whores, immensely popular due to the connection with Mahound, one undoubtedly gets the impression that Rushdie, through his narrator questions Islam's attitude to women. Not only does he portray the scene in filthy language, but he quite explicitly challenges the Muslim politics of

¹⁵ A man who has no control over his wives' actions and whereabouts is dishonoured (he is supposed to be in control).

¹⁶ In his essay "In Good Faith", Rushdie confirms that 'The Curtain' stands for *Hijab* "after the name for 'modest' dress" (IGF: 11). When Westerners think of *hijab*, they tend to think of it as the head-cover frequently used by Muslim women in order to cover up their hair, sometimes parts of the face. For many Westerners this is evidence of the discriminating practices of the Muslim faith. Thus, I will argue, they will associate 'The Curtain' with negative practices.

segregation, a central tenet of Muslim life, and one of the most important of Muslim institutions.

In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie apparently speaks through his character Salman the Persian, who criticises the idea of segregation, believing it to be unhealthy, and causing nothing but harm (SV: 399). But Salman is not the only one who is against seclusion, as Rushdie shows by letting a courtesan comment upon the matter:

‘Listen, those women in that harem, the men don’t talk about anything else these days. No wonder Mahound secluded them, but it’s only made things worse. People fantasize more about what they can’t see.’ (SV: 392)

The politics of segregation comes under severe criticism. The poet Baal links the idea of seclusion to the concept of honour and shame, by defending Mahound for locking up his wives, since it would be a great dishonour if something “bad happened to one of them” (SV: 399). In his essay, “In Good Faith”, Rushdie expresses his views on Muslim segregation politics (thus resembling his fictional character): “Islam may teach that women should be confined to the home and to child-rearing, but Muslim women everywhere insist on leaving the home to work” (IGF: 10). On this subject, I will argue that Rushdie to some extent is mistaken. The role of the family and the complementary role of women and men in Muslim society are dominant and lasting features of Muslim practice. Although many women are entering the work force, millions still strongly support segregation politics, the complimentary roles of the sexes and a focus on the role of childbearing¹⁷.

Despite the insult caused by the brothel scene, however, Rushdie has a plausible case when arguing that he wanted to illustrate how men in a brothel “act out an ancient dream of power and possession, the dream of possessing the queen”, and that this says

¹⁷ For more on this, see: Naguib, Nefissa og Berit Thorbjørnsrud, ‘Midtøsten’ *Identitet, etnisitet og kjønn i Midtøsten og Nord-Afrika*. Kompendium i Midt-Østen og Nord-Afrikas historie. 43-63

something about men and power, rather than about the “wives” or the whores (11). Consequently, he is not attacking Muhammad’s wives, they are after all said to lead chaste lives in the harem, but he rather tries to highlight the negative effects of some ancient customs: the negative side effects of male domination (SV: 393-395). As the novel also expresses, many other negative effects derive from the politics of seclusion. When women are “sequestered from the outside world”, they eventually turn into somewhat ‘brainwashed’ slaves, living a life “in which they wanted nothing more than to be the obedient, [...] submissive helpmeets of a man” (396).

In his own defence for using the brothel scene, Rushdie insists that

I sought images that crystallized the opposition between the sacred and profane worlds. The harem and the brothel provide such opposition. Both are places where women are sequestered, in the harem to keep them from all men except their husband and close family members, in the brothel for the use of strange males. Harem and brothel are antithetical worlds, and the presence in the harem of the Prophet, the receiver of a sacred text, is likewise contrasted with the presence in the brothel of the clapped-out poet, Baal, the creator of profane texts. The two struggling worlds, pure and impure, chaste and coarse, are juxtaposed by making them echoes of one another; and finally, the pure eradicates the impure. (IGF: 10)

Rushdie seems to question Muslim morality by picturing how the male dream about sex is linked to power and possession, while insisting upon the segregation of women (11). It is difficult to see how this criticism could have gone unnoticed. It must have been regarded as a criticism of Muslim practice and consequently of the *Shari’a*, the Muslim sacred law on which pious Muslims build their lives. According to Ramadan,

The Qur’an and the *Sunna* are the two sources on which the whole building of the Islamic sciences is based. Together they constitute *Shari’a*, the exclusive references which direct the way Muslims must go to be faithful to the Revealed Message. (Ramadan: 43)¹⁸

¹⁸ The *sunna*: “Actions and sayings of the Prophet that constitute "orthodox" tradition for the Islamic community” (Eickelman: 177).

In one of Gibreel's dreams, Salman the Persian discusses how the Archangel Gibreel became obsessed by law:

Gibreel appeared to the Prophet and found himself spouting rules, rules, rules, until the faithful could scarcely bear the prospect of any more revelation [...] rules about every damn thing, if a man farts let him turn his Face to the wind, a rule about which hand to use for the purpose of cleaning one's behind. It was as if no aspect of human existence was to be left unregulated, free. (SV: 376)

To a non-Muslim, this paragraph might seem almost comical, quite in accordance with the Orientalist's view of the existence of 'strange and exotic' elements within Islam, something that verifies his/her 'truths' about *the other*. To a Muslim, on the other hand, the paragraph must be blasphemous and degrading. However, Rushdie again has a plausible justification for his emphasis on these very rules. Again, he questions oppressive theory and the grand narrative about Islam. According to him, it is vital to question rules laid down at the time of a religion's origin, since by time, society changes. Thus, rules should not be seen as immutable. I will argue that he is right, particularly concerning heavy penalties such as stoning or mutilation. Similarly, the Islamic rules about evidence, making the woman's testimony only worth half of that of a man, is worth probing (IGF: 9). Rushdie insists that he wants "the reader to think about the validity of [a] religion's rules" (9) In Gibreel's dream, the fateful are ironically told both how much to eat, how to sleep and how to perform sexual acts (SV: 376). Consequently, Salman the Persian criticises Mahound for "inventing capricious and arbitrary laws", clearly reflecting an authorial stance on the matter (376). Moreover, not only were the rules arbitrary, but it was one rule for the faithful, and another rule for Mahound. According to one of the characters, Mahound was allowed the luxury of twelve wives, contrary to the ordinary men who were only allowed four (391).

Rushdie on the Issue of Submission, Mecca and the Rest

Rushdie's focus upon the range of rules as presented in the novel, leads him to a further analysis of the term 'submission', which, I will argue, indicates his view that Islam (meaning submission) is about the absence of free will. As a 'rule', one has to 'submit' in order to be a true Muslim. Rushdie, a great proponent of freedom, clearly challenges this idea. In his essay "In God We Trust",¹⁹ he claims that all the three 'book' religions require an act of submission to the will of God, meaning that God's will "must prevail over history", since "religion places human beings beneath history" (IH: 378). To Rushdie, such a world makes us merely servants, and therefore he seems to ask the question: is religion just a dream of our inadequacy, a human invention? *The Satanic Verses* refers to the term 'Submission' more than once, mostly in a negative manner.

The Grandee of Jahilia institutes a policy of persecution that advances too slowly for Hind. The name of the new religion is *Submission*; now Abu Simpel decrees that its adherents must submit to being sequestered in the most wretched, hovel-filled quarter of the city; to a curfew; to a ban on employment. And there are many physical assaults, women spat upon in shops, the manhandling of the faithful by the gangs of young turks whom the Grandee secretly controls, fire thrown at night through a window to land amongst unwary sleepers. And, by one of the familiar paradoxes of history, the numbers of the faithful multiply, like a crop that miraculously flourishes as conditions of soil and climate grow worse and worse. (SV: 127)

Not only does Rushdie criticise the act of submission, but he also subtly illustrates the underlying aim of his project: to caution people about the danger of absolutism. The reader indirectly understands that fundamentalist views thrive on people's misery, that when times are bad, people need stability and certainty, allegedly provided by religious

¹⁹ In *Imaginary Homelands*

authority. This certainty, however, is deceitful. Appearances deceive, and thus we must be open for alternative interpretations and questions.

Furthermore, this paragraph also reveals Rushdie's opinion on Islam and its view on women. Rushdie lets his character Salman the Persian criticise Mahound's attitude to women, claiming that the women of Yathrib (Medina) were strong and independent, and that they used to serve as examples for the women in Jahilia until Mahound came up with new rules restricting the behaviour of women.

And throughout the marriage the wife keeps her own tent. If she wants to get rid of her husband she turns the tent round to face in the opposite direction, so that when he comes to her he finds fabric where the door should be, and that's that, he's out, divorced, not a thing he can do about it. Well, our girls were beginning to go for that type of thing, getting who knows what sort of ideas in their heads, so at once, bang, out comes the rule book, the angels start pouring out rules about what women mustn't do, he starts forcing them back into the docile attitudes the Prophet prefers, docile or maternal, walking three steps behind or sitting at home being wise and waxing their chins. How the women of Yathrib laughed at the faithful, I swear, but that man is a magician, nobody could resist his charm; the faithful women did as he ordered them. They Submitted: he was offering them Paradise, after all. (SV: 379)

In many ways this part sums up Rushdie's attitude to submission and the orthodoxy of Islam as well as depicting his project. Firstly, he makes a further assault on Islam's attitude towards women. After Jahilia had "settled down to its new life", as Rushdie lets his narrator explain, the suppression of women continued (388). Not only should there be a "call to prayers five times a day", but alcohol would be banned, and the locking up of wives would be the rule (SV: 388). Secondly, Rushdie portrays the chauvinism and the manipulative nature of the business-man-turned-Prophet. Thirdly, he again questions the nature of revelation. Fourthly, he illustrates the power of language, how any 'magician' with a talent for rhetoric can seduce people (who do not know better) with words. Rushdie warns the readers that those who know language control power, an issue which I will briefly discuss while analysing Rushdie's postmodernist project of resistance.

Several other text-internal factors in *The Satanic Verses* have angered the Muslim community, from Rushdie calling the prophet Abraham a “bastard”, to the filthy and abusive language used to describe Mahound’s companions as a “trio of scum” (SV: 97, 103). Syed Shahabuddin claims that apart from the filthy and wounding language, Rushdie’s novel can also be seen as “literary colonialism” and “religious pornography” (Appignanesi: 49).

Rushdie himself, quite credibly, claims that in order to “portray persecution”, one has to allow for “the persecutors to be seen persecuting” (IGF: 10). In many ways he is right. In order to portray nasty things convincingly, one sometimes has to make use of filthy words to get the message through, to make people react. However, it must be said that by using terms like ‘scum’ and ‘bums’ about the Prophet’s companions, Rushdie must have known that he was insulting. Those very terms might have been used by the persecutors, but, by and large, they are not commonly used in Muslim literature, particularly not when describing Islamic characters, since this would be regarded as an offence against honour (IGF: 10). Thus, Rushdie violated Muslim honour by his use of filthy language.

Although other paragraphs in the novel can be seen as blasphemous and abusive they have hardly been criticised in the same manner. As Daniel Pipes observes, the mockery of Khomeini oddly seems to have gone unnoticed by the majority. The novel does indeed portray the Imam in a quite insulting manner, describing him as a monster, one who smashes clocks to stop history, and one who is devouring his subjects, swallowing them whole (SV: 221).

Furthermore, Rushdie’s use of the pre-Islamic name Jahilia for Mecca has been seen as offensive, despite the fact that this is the city’s original name. However, to portray Mecca in such a critical manner, as a city that was “the very stuff of inconstancy,

- the quintessence of unsettlement, shifting, treachery, lack-of-form”, was seen as an insult since today, for millions of Muslims, Mecca is the first and most holy city in the world (SV: 96). However, Rushdie’s own defence for using the term ‘Jahilia’ is reasonable. He claims that Gibreel, in his dreams, had “been plunged by his broken faith back into the condition the word describes”, meaning a state of ignorance (IGF: 8). He insists that his intent was not “to vilify or ‘disprove’ Islam, but to portray a soul in crisis, to show how the loss of God can destroy a man’s life” (8). Despite this reasonable claim, there are reasons to believe that those Muslims who found the term “Jahilia” derogatory, are the very ones who strictly conform to the teachings of Sayyid Qutb and Mawlana Mawdudi²⁰, who rather see modern secular society as a “*jahiliyya*”, vulgar and ignorant of the message of Islam (Rahnema: 161-162).

It lies beyond the scope of this thesis to examine all the potentially offensive text-internal factors, and thus I have focused upon those aspects of *The Satanic Verses* that Muslims have found most insulting. I have tried to establish how certain text-internal factors conflict with the Muslim concept of honour and shame, how Rushdie may have overstepped his artistic freedom by invading the more or less ‘private’ realm of the Muslim psyche. However, I would also like to raise the question: Apart from the more obviously offensive parts of the novel, why did *The Satanic Verses* come to serve as a political means in the conflict between the West and the Rest? Why was Rushdie accused of joining the Orientalists if all he attempted was to embrace “the great possibility that mass migration gives the world” (IGF: 3, 4)? In order to answer these questions, I will attempt to analyse Rushdie’s narrative discourse as it was perceived from secular, religious and literary perspectives.

²⁰ Qutb and Mawdudi “shared a vision of Islam as a political movement, and [...] called for the establishment of an Islamic state (Kipel: 23). Many radical fundamentalists, particularly those who protested against *The Satanic Verses* in Britain, model their actions and follow the visions of these two Muslim fundamentalists.

CHAPTER 2

A Discourse of Resistance

Rushdie's project, his probing into the issue of the sacred and the profane, caused so much havoc that it, with hindsight, has become almost impossible to read *The Satanic Verses* without being influenced by the *fatwa*. However, as Catherine Cundy argues, in order to understand Rushdie's fiction, there is "a need to reassert the validity of his fictions *as* fictions and as the products of an innovative artist of international importance" (Cundy: 96). The uproar over *The Satanic Verses*, followed by the *fatwa*, as well as an extensive research and commentaries concentrating on metaphysical issues of freedom of speech, fundamentalism and blasphemy among others, partially obscured the novel itself. In order to understand Rushdie's philosophical probing, however, by transcending the above-mentioned metaphysical speculations, it is vital to consider the novel in relation to style, themes and narrative technique. *The Satanic Verses* has been attacked by many as incoherent and basically chaotic, but I will argue that the novel is indeed unified by a related set of topics, together articulating a consistent world view.

Rushdie's literary precursors are many, varying from the medieval artist Dante, to East-European masters like Kafka and Bulgakow, experimental modernists like Joyce, as well as Günter Grass and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the master of magical realism, amongst others (Cundy: 5). Rushdie also seems to be greatly influenced by Homi K. Bhabha and Franz Fanon and their theories on resistance and the colonial subject, as well as postmodernist thinkers from Michel Foucault to Jean-Francois Lyotard, all sceptics, questioning language and power as well as foundational pretensions of truths. Rushdie is also beyond doubt influenced by the eighteenth- century writer William Blake and his

theory of reality and denial of authority, which he confirms in his essay “In Good Faith” (IGF: 12).

Rushdie’s Little Narratives of Resistance

According to Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* is “a work of radical dissent and questioning and re-imagining” (IGF: 4). Rushdie claims that literature can help in creating a changed and better world. I will argue that his narrative discourse can be seen as a discourse of resistance, since by attempting to establish new frames of references for discussions, Rushdie’s discourse is, to some extent, countering dominant discourses in society. As he lets his unnamed narrator “ask forbidden things: antiquesions”, in order not to submit, but dissent, *The Satanic Verses* accordingly ushers “newness” into the world by challenging self-righteous orthodoxies (SV: 94, 95). In an anti-authoritarian mode, Rushdie expresses scepticism to all grand narratives, Islam in particular. In *The Satanic Verses*, one of the characters offers her own theory about the dangers of grand narratives. In her view, “society was orchestrated by [...] grand narratives: history, economics, ethics.” (SV: 551) While discussing religious faith with a poet, believed to have been “seduced by religion into a dangerous ambiguity”, she claims that

In India, the development of a corrupt and closed state apparatus had ‘excluded the masses of the people from the ethical project’. As a result, they sought ethical satisfactions in the oldest of the grand narratives, that is, religious faith. ‘But these narratives are being manipulated by the theocracy and various political elements in an entirely retrogressive way.’ (SV: 551)

Rushdie is clearly influenced by post-modern thinkers here, and particularly by Jean-Francois Lyotard, who maintains that in our contemporary world there are no absolute criteria or foundations of belief. According to Lyotard, grand narratives, which deny

validity to other explanations, claiming to “provide universal explanations and trade on the authority this gives them”, lay down oppressive rules and wield suppression (Sim: 8, 261).

The Satanic Verses exemplifies Lyotard’s theory by portraying ideologies which cunningly allow one segment of the weak to come to power (Ayesha, for instance, the poor orphan girl who acquires great power due to her religious visions), whereas the other stagnate or perish. Gibreel Farishta serves as an appropriate example of one whose mind is deeply distorted by the grand narrative of religion. All throughout the novel we learn how this loss of faith haunts him, how religion has become almost nightmarish to him. As the readers were told how religion devoured the souls of those who followed the Imam, “his mouth yawning open at the gates”, swallowing people whole, they also experience how it devours the soul of Gibreel, turning him into a schizophrenic (SV: 221). By dramatising Gibreel’s increasing anguish and distress, his fear of the consequences of disbelief, his visions of good versus evil, Rushdie attempts to reveal how systems of power enslave us. He makes a significant point when he insists that:

Throughout human history, the apostles of purity, those who have claimed to possess a total explanation, have wrought havoc among mere mixed up human beings (IGF: 4).

Unquestionably, Rushdie’s argument is even more valid today than at the time of the publication of his novel. Not only have totalitarian regimes wrought havoc and suppression, but similarly, those who have allowed themselves to be ruled by total explanations, ideologies not open for questioning, have become imprisoned by their beliefs, with destruction as the inevitable outcome. In *The Satanic Verses* this is exemplified by many characters. Ayesha, the symbol of utter purity, who openly leads her followers to death, is a typical example of destruction. A second appropriate example

is the Imam, devouring his subjects. A third and equally suitable example is Mahound himself, who uncompromisingly kills the writers and prostitutes who speak against him. A final example is perhaps Rushdie's focus upon the term 'submission', the idea that leaves no room for compromise, but demands utter devotion to the grand narrative of Islam.

Much has been said on the topic of post-modernism and whether Rushdie belongs to this category or to the category of post-colonial writers. I believe he can be placed within the categories of both, since some call "'postcolonialism' a child of postmodernism" (Loomba: 247). Rushdie does indeed take up many post-modernist tenets, adopting "a sceptical attitude to many of the principles and assumptions that have underpinned Western thought and social life for the last few centuries" (Sim: 339). However, as Stuart Hall claims, there is a difference between post-modernist writers. Some have adopted post-modernism as a "philosophical creed", whereas others have just signalled "the need for new tools to understand the contemporary world" (Loomba: 251). Rushdie is clearly more in line with the latter. Seemingly, he does not adhere to the pessimism of the post-modernist philosophy which rejects modernity entirely and insists that we are living at "the end of the world" (251). That "history stops with us and there is no place to go after this", is undoubtedly not Rushdie's concern (251). As I see it, Rushdie, despite of his anti-authoritarianism, does not seem to be negative in tone, but rather attempts to formulate new and pragmatic solutions in order to deal with contemporary problems.

Clearly Rushdie uses 'new tools' in order to grasp the world, and as I understand his project, he seems to call for what Hall describes as "a mutual reorganization of the local and the global", not as "exclusive perspectives, but as aspects of the same reality which helps reposition each other in more nuanced ways" (251). Rushdie's attempt of creating a

synthesis of belief, of combining a mixture of different habits and traditions, aspects of the East with the West in particular, seems to fit well with Hall's views. Ania Loomba quotes Peter Hulme, who points out that there is a need to move away from grand narratives, and rather promote "smaller narratives, [...] with attention paid to local topography, so that maps can become fuller" (252). As I see it, this is clearly Rushdie's project. Quite in accordance with Hulme as well as Lyotard, *The Satanic Verses* seems to promote little narratives of resistance "put together on a tactical basis by small groups of individuals [here migrants] to achieve some particular objective" (Sim: 8). According to Lyotard, one can imagine individuals as "little narratives seeking to resist the power of authoritarian grand narratives, such as the state or multinational corporations. (306)

Rushdie seemingly sees his migrants as little narratives seeking to resist the power of the grand narrative of capitalism, of Empire and of religious orthodoxy. By dissenting from "imposed orthodoxies *of all types*, from the view that the world is quite clearly This and not That," Rushdie first and foremost explores the migrant condition by analysing how to hold on to a consistent idea of selfhood in a changing world, rather than an attack on religious faith (IGF: 3, 6). However, as I have tried to establish through my analysis of the most offensive text-internal factors, the novel does to some extent undermine religious faith, and it is the very questioning and re-imagining in itself which have caused uproar.

According to some commentators it is the notion of doubt that people are angry about (Appignanesi: 30). Many Muslims oppose Rushdie's claim that "everything we know is pervaded by doubt and not by certainty" (30, 31). As Peter Mullen observes, Muslims in general are accustomed to a world where something is "accepted as basic and definitive, as authoritative" (Cohn-Sherbok: 35).²¹ This something is the holy Quran.

²¹ The statement is taken from Peter Mullen's essay "Satanic Asides", in Cohn-Sherbok, p. 1-35

Rushdie, however, to a great extent rejects authority. To him, it is the very concept of freedom itself which has to be accepted as basic and definitive. As he expresses it in his essay “In Good Faith”, the freedom to challenge or to offend, are basic human rights (IGF: 6). Thus, to Rushdie, it seems like freedom is found in saying no to conventional beliefs and established authority. By saying no, he celebrates doubt, insisting that “doubt is the central condition of a human being in the 20th century” (Appignanesi: 30).

Consequently, all throughout *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie explores the very opposition of doubt versus faith precisely in order to investigate how the migrant copes in the changing world. Therefore, despite the blasphemy, by exploring how the migrant adapts to new environments and copes with the pressure of a secular multi-cultural society, Rushdie explores issues greatly important in our contemporary world. How are we to deal with the increasing migration with its corollary, an influx of conflicting voices of identities, new ideas and values? How are we to grasp the ‘freedom’ that life offers us, being aware of the term’s various meanings? And finally, what happens to individuals when tradition faces modernity? The latter is of particular importance, since it is linked to the issue of identity, not only a main concern of Rushdie, but, furthermore, of his opponents.

Tradition versus Modernity – A Clash of Identities

The Satanic Verses presents us with conflicting voices of cultural and religious identity, and, thus, what lies at the heart of the dilemma seems to be one of tradition versus modernity. This is not to say that traditional, orthodox Muslims reject modernity entirely, which is far from being the case, but the notion of tradition versus modernity can help to establish an overall framework for discussion. As the novel shows, some of the

characters are indeed struggling to create or re-create their identities while clinging to shared tradition and history, whereas others deny tradition entirely.

Paul Brians notes that, “one traditional strategy of oppressed or marginalised groups is to try to create a sense of identity by dwelling on their shared history” (Brians: 88).

Ania Loomba claims that for many nationalists or anti-colonialists, liberation has “hinged upon the discovery or rehabilitation of their cultural identity which European colonialism [has] disparaged and wrecked” (Loomba: 181). She has a reasonable argument. Much in accordance with the theories of Franz Fanon, radical Muslims have in an increasing degree emphasised and searched for a “beautiful splendid era”, a Muslim Golden Age, something which could rehabilitate them as a pan-Islamic nation (181).

Loomba quotes Stuart Hall, who argues that “identity is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (181). No colonised peoples can “turn back to the idea of a collective pre-colonial culture, and a past ‘which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure [their] sense of [themselves] into eternity’”(182).

Rushdie’s fictional characters do in various degrees cling to a romantic view of the world. Ironically, his dislocated characters, torn between various worlds, both in a physical and abstract sense, very much bear a resemblance to those dislocated subjects who protested his novel, mostly disinherited Muslims (but also people from the devout middle class) from the Indian subcontinent and South-Asian migrants in Britain (Pipes: 139-140). Saladin and Gibreel, whom Cundy calls the “free-falling protagonists of *The Satanic Verses*”, in many ways therefore “provide the most direct image [...] of the post-colonial subject in collision with his world” (Cundy: 67). According to Cundy, one can see the protagonists’ fall as a “process of transmutation [...] whereby the migrant’s identity is transformed through the very act of migration” (68). The protagonists’ descent

on England is, in Cundy's view "replete with the tensions of their condition", a tension of distress and alienation while moving between cultures (67).

Benslama claims that Rushdie's fictional characters in many ways resembled each and one of those who burned his books. As the main characters in *The Satanic Verses* fall out of the airplane, so had they all virtually "fallen out of the airplane" – out of tradition, out of the past (Braziller: 88). Occupying a space between assimilation and alienation, trying to protect their faith and identity in an often hostile environment, they therefore reacted more fiercely to Rushdie's novel than, for instance Arab Muslims, who mostly ignored the issue (88).

Ramadan claims that Muslims living in Western Europe daily encounter serious problems when it comes to dealing with their Muslim identity, which is a sensitive issue for Europeans and Muslims alike. The question of identity, he states, has for long been treated as one of either assimilation or alienation. According to Ramadan, those who have chosen the way of assimilation have in many ways lost their own identity, whereas the latter, those who have chosen to live "apart from society in order to protect [themselves]" have become completely alienated (Ramadan: 179). There are reasons to believe that those who protested Rushdie's novel most violently were precisely these alienated or isolated individuals who had problems of identifying themselves as confident and assertive believers while living "in-between" the cultures (179).

Moreover, not only did Rushdie let his characters fall away from the Book (the Quran), but, furthermore, he put them in a 'modern book', thus creating a blank space, a way of re-creating their identity from scratch. Rushdie presents the readers to this solution through his protagonist, Saladin, who also has to start from scratch (like Gibreel) after falling out of the plane. What path will he chose, one of tradition and uncompromising purity, or one of assimilation? Or better still, at least according to

Rushdie, one of mixing and intermingling? How will Saladin be able to reconcile the old and the new (IGF: 4)? Saladin, feeling that he is in a void, realises that he has been given a second chance, a new life, but understands that in order to survive, he would have to, as already mentioned, “construct everything from scratch, would have to invent the ground beneath his feet before he could take a step” (SV: 136).

However, those who protested against the novel, most of them probably disturbed by the moral dislocation of their host society, wanted to reside firmly in the Quran, i.e., to keep their tradition, religion and Muslim identity intact. Fearing a complete “process of acculturation”, and rejecting Rushdie’s questioning and doubt which would only instigate further discomfort, they rejected Rushdie’s blank space, his newness, his hybridized Islam (Ramadan: 186).

The issue of tradition versus modernity when it comes to identity is a complex one. Ramadan claims that many Muslims are “living according to internal rules as if they were out of Europe” (188). What many of these Muslims have in common is that they do not

Refer to the specific traditions of their countries of origin but, instead, very often to the life of the Prophet and his Companions: they change their dress, wear turbans or *jelabiyya*, assiduously frequent the mosques and avoid contact with the external world and non-Muslims. (188)

Ramadan claims that these Muslims, confusing the correct Islamic teachings with “the way of life and customs of the desert inhabitants of the 7th century”, feel that the only way to live in Europe, is “out of Europe”, i.e., in isolation (188).

Undoubtedly, to these orthodox Muslims, Rushdie’s novel presented a much bigger problem than to those who in many ways had assimilated into the host society. Clearly, to these groups, who according to Ramadan, constantly refer to the Prophet and his

companions as the best moral instructors for contemporary society, Rushdie's novel, by depicting 'a fall out of tradition', and calling for a questioning of the very same instructors, created outrage. Despite Rushdie's effort at creating a new way of seeing the world (or maybe precisely because of), and a new "literary language and literary forms in which the experience of formerly colonized, still-disadvantaged peoples [can] find full expression", among these groups he was bound to fail (IGF: 3).

The Satanic Verses brilliantly portrays how Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta experience uprooting and transformation and consequently become "divided selves" (7). For Chamcha, the division is mostly secular and societal, since he is torn between East and West, for Farishta, the division is spiritual, since he has lost his faith and, as Rushdie claims in his essay "In Good Faith", "is strung out between his immense need to believe and his new inability to do so" (7).

Chamcha's divided self, I will argue, is partly a result of his blind belief in the grand narrative of Empire, and the fact that no matter what he does, he cannot become white. Rushdie's continuous focus upon the destructive power of grand narratives seems appropriate. In *The Satanic Verses* there are several characters who claim allegiance to grand narratives, best exemplified by the immature Saladin Chamcha as well as various fundamentalists. However, Rushdie also portrays several characters who violently voice protest, among them Rekha Merchant, Zeeny, Jumpy Joshi and the poets of dissent, Bhupen and Baal. Much in accordance with Homi K. Bhaba's and Franz Fanon's theories on colonial identities and Bhaba's concept of hybridity, Rushdie explores the notion of 'otherness' and highlights how colonial discourse interferes with the identity of the migrant. Rushdie's protagonist, Saladin Chamcha, having relied solely on British superiority, of a 'picture-postcard' England, finds it almost impossible to forge an identity based on his Indianness. Rather than question the authenticity of his knowledge

about Britain and the grand narrative of Empire, he believes only what he has been told, in his fairy-tales of the past.

Thus, through his fictional character Chamcha, Rushdie tries to show that the grand narrative of capitalism and the all-encompassing benefits of liberal democracy are flawed. They do not apply to the nation at large, merely to a particular segment of the population, the ethnic British in particular. As the readers experience throughout the novel, despite Chamcha's continuous effort to find his way in British society, he fails. Although he has struggled to achieve "a small measure of fineness", believing that if he could become a proper English gentleman, he would succeed on the same terms as someone ethnically British, he eventually succumbs to hostile immigration laws as the land (as in society) drags him down (SV: 269). Rushdie's chapter 'A City Visible But Unseen', illustrates, as I will argue, that Chamcha, being an Indian, is a citizen visible, but unseen. Much in accordance with the thoughts of Fanon, Rushdie explores how the (former) "colonised subject realises that he can never attain the whiteness he has been taught to desire, or shed the blackness he has learnt to devalue" (Loomba: 176). Although he changes his name, Saladin Chamcha cannot escape his Indianness, he will always first and foremost be Mr. Salahuddin Chamchawala.

Gibreel Farishta's crisis of identity is, according to Rushdie, caused by "a rift in the soul" deriving from his loss of religious faith (IGF: 7) His immense need to believe probably springs from an innate fear of the consequences of disbelief. In the case of Gibreel, I will argue that Rushdie explores the issue of identity as being distorted by religious fanaticism. Through Gibreel's dream, the readers are exposed to simple dichotomies of heaven versus hell and good versus evil, as well as witnessing how this tormented protagonist, haunted by the past, eventually commits suicide. Here, Rushdie's use of dream sequences clearly demonstrates that not only does there exist a supernatural

world, but as humans we are being constantly exposed to illusions and hallucinations, difficult to decode.

In other words, the novel presents us with important existential questions which I will analyse at some length below: on what experiences and ideas do we base our identity, and how do we define ourselves. Are we capable of distinguishing myths from facts while reclaiming identity, or do we merely cling to the past and succumb to what we are told?

From the very beginning of *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie explores the issue of identity by creating and embracing newness. In the opening chapter of *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie asks the question:

How does newness enter the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made? How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is? What compromises, what deals, what betrayals of its secret nature must it make to stave off the wrecking crew, the exterminating angel, the guillotine? (SV: 8)

As Rushdie admits through the unnamed narrator, newness might indeed be dangerous, presenting the individual to a world of compromises. To millions of people, the mere idea of embracing newness is incompatible with tradition, undoubtedly seen as comforting in a world of unfamiliar pluralism. The mere idea of transgressing familiar boundaries is intimidating. To Rushdie, however, ancient traditions are seldom anything but fairy-tales of the past, restrictive to individual creativity. Rushdie warns the readers that their imagined past is dead and cannot be repeated: It can only be recreated by embracing newness. Thus, throughout the novel, he demonstrates the importance of breaking away from the illusions of the past, by focusing upon themes of newness and change, of intermingling and transformation, pluralism and diversity, in order to make the readers aware of the consequences of deceptive illusions.

Rosa Diamond is an appropriate example of the destructive power of past illusions. While she was alive, she lived solely in the past, in the imagined England of William the Conqueror, and the forgotten Argentine of her dead lover. Not even on her deathbed was she able “to distinguish memory from wishes, or guilty reconstructions, from confessional truths”, let alone “look her history in the eye” (SV: 157).

By juxtaposing the past and the present, Rushdie’s project of liberation is an attempt at deconstructing false narratives based on guilty reconstructions. He provokes the readers into a radical re-assessment of the Muslim experience, as well as of received history in general, in order to counter myths with facts, in short, to explore the opposition between dreams, imagination and truths. Rushdie claims that in light of changing political or cultural events, as well as a changing demography for the immigrants concerned, there is a need to question authorities and dogmas. As the migrant engages in an act of reclaiming identity, it is important that he/ she paints sustainable images of the past, recognizing that all we can remember are fragments, rather than picturing a perfect copy of a past that does not exist, or to cling to traditional elements which are destructive.

Rushdie’s attempt at deconstructing the image of a perfect past, clashed with the project of those fundamentalists within the Muslim diaspora who were engaged in an effort to do the exact opposite, namely to restore a perfect past. Due to the expansion of several networks promoting *da’wa*,²² the “call” to Islam, the issue of *The Satanic Verses* was brought to the public at large (Eickelman: 143). As a result, the propaganda served to make Muslim groups concerned of a number of Muslim issues, which eventually took on a symbolic currency (146). Significant symbols “integral to the identity and aspirations of groups of like-minded individuals” have been increasingly political (4). As the act of

²² Dawa groups are engaged in the formation and sustaining of a transnational Islam.

veiling took on political significance when it was transformed into a public symbol, of that of being a Muslim, so, I will argue, did the actual protest against *The Satanic Verses* take the form of a symbolic and political act. As a consequence, to radical fundamentalists, only if you disapprove of *The Satanic Verses*, are you a true Muslim.

A distinctive Muslim identity has in an increasing degree been enforced all throughout the Muslim world, in the diaspora in particular. Where once “territory was the root of one’s identity, ethnicity and religious activism have [increasingly] become “deterritorialized”” (136). Contrary to those Muslims, living “in the House of Islam”²³, whose identity are taken for granted, religion becomes more crucial to the identity of the Muslims who live in Western countries (Ali: 311). As a result, anything that threatens or interferes with religion is frequently met with fierce resistance.

Keith M. Booker claims that psychological dimensions are “involved in the public perception of events” (Booker: 46). Keeping in mind the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, and the discussions about “the West and the Rest” that went on in the 80’s and 90’s (also bearing in mind Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations*), particularly after the fall of the Soviet Union, it is easy to apprehend the force of the offending passages in *The Satanic Verses*. Large parts of the Muslim world, particularly Muslim South Asia, were experiencing a deepening crisis of politics and society coupled with religious fundamentalism and a search for an authentic past (Kepel: 6). Rushdie himself states that “it was a disillusioned age” (IH: 379). The mass of the Muslim poor, both of the diaspora as well as in other parts of the Muslim world, were experiencing a relative deprivation in contrast to the rest of society. Despite the fact that “capitalism had created a single market” it had proved to be cunning and resilient, leaving ‘the first world’ “as the main repository of wealth and the principal wielder of uncontrolled military power” (Ali: 3).

²³ Within Muslim countries where the threat of secular forces are of less significance.

Eickelman states that as a means of combating this disillusioned age, “a constant across the Muslim world have been the invocation of ideas and symbols, which Muslims in different contexts identify as “Islamic”” (Eickelman: 4). In this atmosphere of despair, Rushdie challenged Muslim ideas and symbols from a secular point of view, indicating that they did not have any real value, but were invoked by religious and political authority in order to “legitimize their rule” (5). This brings me to Rushdie’s exploration of simulacra, his attempt to show how the collective imagination sometimes is deceived into thinking that “signs refer to something real and solid outside the system” (Sim: 358). According to Rushdie, signs are unreliable, and thus we are sometimes deceived into false system of beliefs.

Simulacra – Myth versus Fact in *The Satanic Verses* and Beyond

Rushdie argues in *Imaginary Homelands* that while we are looking back, trying to recapture our past in order to come to terms with our sense of loss, we create fictions, or “imaginary homelands” (IH: 10). Not only do we dream false versions of ourselves, but we are “picture-making” as Rushdie claims, constructing “pictures of the world” before “we step inside the frames” (378). He makes an analogy to the

Hindu idea of *maya*, the veil of illusion that hangs before our limited human eyes and prevents us from seeing things as they truly are – so that we mistake the veil, *maya*, for reality. (378)

The Satanic Verses, in a typical post-modernist fashion, systematically portrays this opposition between reality and illusions, what the post-modern thinker Jean Baudrillard would call simulacra: a world in which “the collective imagination may be deceived into thinking that [...] signs refer to something real” and “where we [can] no longer

differentiate between reality and simulacrum” (Sim: 11, 358). Rushdie’s use of dream sequences in the novel supports Baudrillard’s idea of simulacra. By exploring the issue of reality versus myth, Rushdie lays bare the myth of religious and political harmony expressed by oppressive orthodox authority. Furthermore, through his characters he presents the readers with a post-modern world in which the individual is more often than not up against manipulation and delusion of both a profane and religious character.

Rushdie’s protagonists are performing actors, capable of simulating reality and seducing the audience. Rushdie’s choice of vocations for his protagonists is not accidental. Gibreel takes the roles of various deities, and Saladin works as a voice impersonator on the radio. Saladin is fully aware of his power, insisting that “he could convince an audience that he was Russian, Chinese, Sicilian, the President of the United States” (SV: 60). No one would know, since his blackness was properly concealed (60). This is a significant paragraph. As Mimi, his female equivalent and partner confesses, “Your voice becomes famous but they hide your face” (61). Thus, since no one is capable of recognizing this mysterious voice, they can create a myth, an illusion, a simulacra. To be more specific, in reality people can argue that Saladin Chamcha is an Englishman. Saladin, aware of this, realises that although both of them become legends, they are somewhat “crippled legends, dark stars” (61). If he came forward, i.e., blunted his blackness, his stardom would somewhat fade.

Gibreel and Saladin quite naturally seduce the audience, in the same manner as political and religious authorities at times express false and ‘satanic tales’ in order to arouse the masses for political reasons. Rushdie cautions us to be aware of all satanic tales, to question them and make our own judgement, rather than blindly listen, react and obey. Moreover, we must recognise that vivid visions might be nothing but products of a hallucinating mind. Rushdie, seemingly talking to humans in general, but migrants in

particular, warns us about this seduction, while stimulating people to re-think and re-evaluate their history in order to claim a sound identity.

Saladin Chamcha ultimately realises that his “picture-postcard England” is nothing but an illusion. Through his physical mutation from a semi-goat to a restored human being, he seems simultaneously to have gone through a mutation in his mind. Realising that all is not well in ‘racist’ Britain, he eventually gets a clear idea of post-modern society, a society that reflects “style instead of substance, the image instead of the reality...” (SV: 527). Rushdie clearly addresses the emptiness of consumer capitalism, something which is important to bear in mind since he has been accused of solely attacking Islam and Muslims. Chamcha realises that in being a member of a “remote-control culture”, he merely chooses which ‘reality’ to take in, by “channel-hopping” and fast-forwarding compulsively (419).

As camera cuts, “chooses sides”, by manipulating and controlling the scenes, so do political and religious authority show only a fragmented reality, a fabricated truth in order to serve their best interests (470, 472, 551). As the camera observes “the shadow-lands from afar, and of course from above”, thus incapable of visualising the whole, so does the reporter frequently describe the situation from a biased perspective, sometimes superficially, unable to account for more than one perspective at the time (470). Through his focus upon the role of media in our contemporary society, I will argue that Rushdie informs the readers that there is a lot going on “in places which the camera cannot see”, and consequently, we are not given the full reality (472). If we relate this to Rushdie’s overall denial of religious and political authority, the connection becomes clear. Given the fact that appearances deceive, we must show caution in order not to mistake the world of simulation for reality.

If we relate the theories of simulacra to Rushdie's treatment of Muhammad, we can argue that Muhammad has become more than anything a powerful symbol of purity, and that the symbol generates a simulacrum, a misrepresentation of reality. In Rushdie's view, this particular symbol of purity does not seem to refer to something real and solid outside the system, since the real Muhammad was merely a normal and fallible man. Rushdie warns us that we have to see beyond all misrepresentations. Since we are living in a post-modern world of simulacra, we can only trust the fragments, not the constructed story. In other words, if we wish to stand up against authoritarianism, we must be aware of the power of simulacra as well as of the manipulation of knowledge and power – a constant that causes confusion between reality and myth.

Knowledge and Power

Lyotard claimed that knowledge could become “a source of conflict between nations” (Sim: 8). If we relate this information to *The Satanic Verses*, the novel not only presents us with various oppositional voices of knowledge, but the response to the novel is based upon quite contrary views and interpretations of knowledge. In the novel, Rushdie dramatises Lyotard's views by pointing out that those who control knowledge exert complete social and political control. Eickelman observes that

persuasion is largely an act of speech [...] and that the way we use language is intimately related to how we construct communal identities and promote and defend our aspirations. (Eickelman: 11)

This might seem obvious to the well-informed reader. However, as Eickelman claims, “language can take on unintended meanings, leading to unforeseen consequences”, for instance by both legitimising and de-legitimising tyranny (11) Throughout *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie warns us about the power of language by highlighting the politics of the

media. Through his characters he exposes how a centralized control of knowledge not only imprisons each and one of us, and the migrant in particular, but simultaneously introduces us to a world of simulacra, where only selected stories and images are being conveyed by those who control the medium of language.

Rushdie's choice of locations for the various protagonists demonstrates his emphasis on language and power. He shows how language not only is fragile and unreliable, but how it can be twisted if it is to accomplish a particular purpose. Since Mahound was working in an environment of illiteracy and ignorance, he was perfectly capable of manipulating his audience should he have wished to do so. Salman the Persian sarcastically called him a magician with words.

In addition, Rushdie demonstrates how language is being manipulated for political purposes. When Chamcha wakes up in a sanatorium (allegedly a detention centre) surrounded by monstrous creatures, one of them a manticore, he is being told by his 'inmates' that all of them are being "demonized by the 'host culture's' attitude to them" (IGF: 11). Rushdie's use of the manticore as a symbol of a man-eater, an exotic creature of destruction, is probably used in order to reveal how knowledge is constantly being constructed. In many ways, Westerners invest rather exotic fantasies in their theories of immigrants, and Rushdie is clearly ridiculing the ideas of Orientalism which I will come back to. Through Chamcha, who embodies the demonization process, Rushdie dramatises how the racist host culture, via the use of language, positions itself above its immigrants. By letting one of the characters in the sanatorium explain that "they [the authority] have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct", he points out the power of language (11). But, as the readers clearly know by now, language deceives, as Rushdie vividly exemplifies by quoting William Blake: "*Then I asked: does a firm persuasion that a thing is so, make it so?*" (SV: 349) Rushdie, who does not believe in

simple statements like this, speaks through his unnamed narrator, who repeatedly quotes “It was so, it was not” (147). Although something appears to be true, it is not necessarily so. As Rushdie confirms in his essay “In Good Faith”:

If migrant groups are called devils by others, that does not really make them demonic. And if devils are not necessarily devilish, angels may not necessarily be angelic. (IGF: 11)

This paragraph highlights an important part of Rushdie’s project, namely to expose the sometimes terrible conditions of the migrants, how he/she suffers under racist laws due to prejudice and intolerance based on false conceptions. Undoubtedly, his emphasis on this particular topic seems to be connected to the chapters dealing with revelation and religion. As a consequence of victimisation processes in general, brought about by the manipulation of knowledge, people are either brought to docility, as we have witnessed in Rushdie’s portrait of religion and the act of submission, or in the worst case, to a state of radical fundamentalism, exemplified by the Sikh terrorists blowing up the plane in the novel, or finally, Ayesha, leading her followers to their death.

Language is constantly being manipulated, not only by religious and political authorities, but also by writers and novelists. And as we have seen, language evidently has a way of determining and influencing the reception of the message beyond apprehension. Rushdie himself played with language as well as themes. The response to his rhetoric varied, from one of power and dominance, clearly Neo-Orientalist in style, to one of liberation, all depending on perspective.

Orientalism as Discourse

Despite the fact that *The Satanic Verses* attacks the hazards of modernity, the emptiness of consumer capitalism, racism and Thatcherism, the ridiculing of Islam came to overshadow all other issues (SV: 275-278). According to Shabbir Akhtar, the most dangerous aspect of the whole issue was that the novel would add to “the existing [and long-held] stock of Western prejudices against the religion of the Arabian Prophet” (Cohn-Sherbook: 14). He is without doubt referring to the ideas of Orientalism. With hindsight, I will argue that he was right, although it was perhaps not so much the novel itself as it was the response to it that brought the issue of Orientalism to the forefront.

Rushdie’s rhetoric came to be seen as a rhetoric of power and dominance, a hostile attempt at degrading Islam and Muslim culture. Most Muslims felt a certain unease since Rushdie, having a Muslim name and being of Muslim origin, should by rights “protect the reputation of the Prophet Muhammad, not mock it” (Pipes: 114). Rushdie’s residence in London, and the fact that he had ‘abandoned’ his ancestral country, suggested that he had joined the West in an imperialist, or more precisely, Neo-Orientalist attack on Islam (114). Even the writer and cultural theorist Edward Said, an ardent defender of Rushdie, was troubled by this fact. Why, did he ask, has Rushdie joined the “legions of Orientalists in Orientalizing Islam so radically and unfairly?” (114).

Is there any substance to this accusation? Was *The Satanic Verses* merely a piece of anti-Islamic polemic? Did Rushdie’s novel serve the Orientalist tradition, or was it trying to do the very opposite, by attempting to deconstruct the long-held image of *the other*, created by Orientalism?

Firstly, I will discuss the Orientalist tradition by consulting Edward Said’s famous work *Orientalism* (1978), and secondly, I will analyse Rushdie’s novel within this frame

of reference. Said's work is clearly indebted to the post-modern thinker Michel Foucault's "discussion of knowledge/power", as well as Jacques Derrida's notion about certain privileged binary oppositions (Sim: 329).

According to Said, whereas *Orientalism* as a generic term describes "the Western approach to the Orient; Orientalism is the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery and practice" (Said: 73). The latter term is also a word that designates "the collection of dreams, images and vocabularies available to anyone who has tried to talk about what lies east of the dividing line" (73). In Said's view, by using these two terms of approach, Europe has during the centuries gradually "advanced securely and unmetaphorically upon the Orient", seeing it as an object, and thus exercising power over it (73). In his work, Said claims that the West through centuries has categorized and denigrated the Orient by analysing it via the notion of binary oppositions: the notion that "given examples of human behaviour must belong to one or other category - but not both" (Sim: 201-202). He claims that "the Orient, and in particular the Near Orient, became known in the West as its great complementary opposite since antiquity" (Said: 58). The ideas of Orientalism hold that Westerners not only have "gained in strength and identity by setting [themselves] off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self", but furthermore, Westerners have become strong because they are "rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion", completely in opposition to 'Arab-Orientals', who are irrational, violent, non-liberal and so forth (Sim: 329). Thus, according to Said, "the West established a good image for itself by disavowing irrational feelings" which they instead "projected to an Oriental other" (330).

Undoubtedly, *The Satanic Verses* portrays Islam and Muhammad much in accordance with the nineteenth century Orientalist tradition, although in rather more

subtle ways. What has outraged Muslim sensibilities the most is that Rushdie has used medieval Christian terminology. During the Middle Ages, the Christian West depicted Mahound as a devil believed to have composed the Quran. Since many Christians took Muhammad to be a false prophet, they named him Mahound, and subsequently treated him as a devil.

Since the Crusaders, and after the Muslim conquest of the Near East, dissatisfied Christian clerics claimed that Mahound, “the-prophet-as-devil” was nothing but “an impostor who had learned his devilish craft from a disillusioned Greek monk who was determined to destroy the Church” (Ruthven: 35). Muhammad came to be thought of as a charlatan and a lustful sensualist, and the Crusaders regarded his revelations with suspicion, something he received “in the course of epileptic fits” (35). Christianity created a horrifying picture of Islam, a frightful force for which Christians had only contempt (Said: 59). They regarded Islam as a false version of Christianity, a brutal and barbaric invention. According to Said, “Islam [came] to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians” (Said: 59). Said quotes Muir²⁴ who claimed that

The sword of Muhammed, and the Kor’an, are the most stubborn enemies of Civilisation, Liberty and the Truth which the world has yet known. (151)

Muhammad is regarded as both an enemy of civilisation and a profoundly suspicious character:

Mohammed was viewed as the disseminator of a false Revelation, [and] he became as well the epitome of lechery, debauchery, sodomy, and a whole battery of assorted treacheries, all of which derived “logically” from his doctrinal impostures. (62)

²⁴ From William Muir’s book *Life of Mahomet* (1858 -1861).

Far from treating his Islamic characters in the same manner, however, Rushdie seems to have invoked sentiments similar to those brought about by Orientalism. Although *The Satanic Verses* does not explicitly discuss Islam, Rushdie is using Orientalist terms, as well as alluding to Orientalists notions about Muhammad, Islam, the Quran, Arabs and their views on women. According to Said, Dante placed Muhammad in a “hierarchy of evils”, predicting his eternal fate as an extremely disgusting one, something which clearly would provide terrible reading for pious Muslims (Said: 68). As he located Muhammad (or “Mahometto”) “in the eight of the nine circles of Hell”, next to the Devil himself, clearly suggesting that Muhammad was a criminal of the worst sort, so does Rushdie portray Mahound as the Devil’s partner in business (Said: 68). Moreover, Rushdie’s descriptions of the brothel and the harem, and his subtle allusions to excessive sexuality, invoke the Orientalist’s myth about the Orient as first and foremost a place of pleasure, desire and mysticism. Finally, Rushdie’s speculations about the Prophet’s epilepsy are clearly taken from the Orientalist tradition.

Despite the fact that Rushdie tried to act as a mediator between various groups by making Islam, as Jussawalla claims, “more tolerant, less ‘hate-filled’ and less practice-oriented,” his choice of vocabulary was rather ill advised (Booker: 97). Although Rushdie criticised fundamentalist Islam, and not Islam in general, I will argue that his choice of terms derive from what Said calls, “a vocabulary, a universe of representative discourse peculiar to the discussion and understanding of Islam and the Orient” (Said: 71). According to Said, this is a discourse that considers it “to be a fact—that Mohammed is an imposter, for example—is a component of the discourse, a statement the discourse compels one to make whenever the name Mohammed occurs” (71). This is particularly revealing. By using the name ‘Mahound’ (false imposter), Rushdie evoked the ideas of Orientalism. According to Said, although the sources of the Western ideas

about the Orient may have changed in time, their character has not (62). If Muhammad was believed to be an imposter or a cunning apostate in the Middle-Ages, the difference today is none of increased tolerance and enlightenment. As Said claims, “in the twentieth century an Orientalist scholar, an erudite specialist, will [merely] be the one to point out how Islam is really no more than second-order Arian heresy”, meaning that Muhammad is still regarded as an imposter and a heretic (63).

Thus, to a certain extent, Rushdie placed himself within the Orientalist tradition. This does not mean that he sided with the Orientalists. On the contrary, Rushdie’s project seems to be one of deconstructing the long-held image of the *other*, created by Orientalism. Interestingly, Said’s *Orientalism* has also been accused of being a piece of anti-Western polemic. As Said’s work has been perceived by Islamic fundamentalists to be a harsh defence of their culture, an “affirmation of warring and hopelessly antithetical identities”, rather than a “study in critique” a description of how a “powerful discursive system” manages to create hegemony over another, so has *The Satanic Verses*, I will argue, been a victim of similar misconceptions (338). Through my next analysis, I will attempt to illustrate this by exemplifying how Rushdie’s novel in similar ways is a critique and a description of how powerful discursive systems, i.e., the grand narrative of Islam as well as of Orientalism, struggle to create hegemony.

A Rhetoric of Liberation

What lies at the heart of *The Satanic Verses* is an ambition to show that there are no clear-cut binary oppositions. Throughout the novel, Rushdie deconstructs the image of the solely rational, reasonable and good Western Europeans, in opposition to the passionate, animalistic and exotic South Asians (or Arab-Orientals). By reversing the notion of white

versus black, good versus evil, he attempts to open a debate in order to stir readers and critics to engage more openly with what he sees as enslaving systems of belief.

Rushdie claims that “black and white descriptions of society are no longer compatible”, and thus in all his fiction he wants to explore how to build a new world “out of an old, legend-haunted civilization, an old culture which [has been] brought into the heart of a newer one” (IH: 19). Throughout *The Satanic Verses*, in order to reveal his theories, he firstly attacks the Orientalist’s view of the ‘Oriental’, or, more particularly in the novel, the (former) coloniser versus the (former) colonised. And, secondly, he attacks the Islamic world-view as a binary one, one of heaven versus hell, good versus evil, angel versus devil, sin versus obedience, and male versus female.

By harshly attacking the grand narrative of Empire, and of British superiority, Rushdie focuses upon British racism. Through one of his characters, Rushdie speaks about how migrants have to “endure all the privations and humiliations of the process of immigration”, and manages to highlight how frequently Westerners think in terms of binary oppositions, and, furthermore, he demonstrates the importance of rhetoric (SV: 256). After Saladin Chamcha’s transformation into a semi-goat, a horned demon, he is kicked and mocked by the police, who call him a Packy and an animal. After he has had an ‘accident’ and the police discover his excrements on the floor of the van, they shout: “You’re all the same. Can’t expect animals to observe civilized standards” (SV: 164).

This stereotyping quite clearly echoes an Orientalist discourse, one that frequently regards Arab-Orientals as nothing but uncivilized ‘animals’. However, there is reason to believe that Rushdie, far from being a ‘Neo-Orientalist’ himself, merely is satirizing Orientalist views. Clearly, his description of the British immigrant officers is satirical. When Saladin Chamcha introduces himself as an Englishman, the officers, paradoxically having the foreign names of Novak, Bruno and Stein, protest: “Look at yourself. You’re

a fucking Packy billy. Sally-who? – What kind of a name is that for an Englishman?”
(SV: 168)

Despite his criticism of British racism, however, Rushdie does not confine narrow-mindedness to Britain solely, his project being one of exposing the nature of both Orientalism and Occidentalism. Portraying his characters visiting India, a country embedded in racism, intolerance and, as a corollary, religious wars, the poet Bhupen Gandhi passionately exclaims: “‘How can you accuse others of being prejudiced when our own hands are so dirty?’” (SV: 532). Comparing his own country with that of Britain, Bhupen says: “you find here all the bigotries, all the procedures associated with oppressor groups” (532).

Rushdie also deconstructs the Islamic world-view as a binary one. According to the strict religious doctrine of dualism, “the universe is under the dominion of two opposing principles one of which is good and the other evil”.²⁵ Rushdie deconstructs this doctrine, believing it to prevent man from recognising his true nature. Rushdie’s view is credible. Religious fundamentalists are constantly employing a rhetoric of dichotomies, emphasising the issue of good and evil in order to divide people along religious and political lines.

Rushdie has referred several times to William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as well as Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* as sources of influence (IGF: 12). He seems to agree with Blake, who objected to the conventional oppositions between good and evil and instead proposed a “marriage” between the two (Norton: 72-73). According to Blake, there could be no progression without contraries. In his view, opposites like attraction and repulsion, as well as love and hate, were all necessary to human existence (72-73). Indebted to Blake and Bulgakov as he is, Rushdie reverses the conventional ideas of good and evil while seemingly taking a favourable view of the

²⁵ The definition of ‘dualism’ is taken from Merriam-Webster Online.

Devil (IGF: 12).²⁶ While evil might prove beneficial, good is not necessarily indispensable to progress. If we take the example of Mahound, the symbol of purity, innocence and restraint, Rushdie's point becomes clearer. Mahound proved himself to be both evil and good. When he showed ruthlessness, he gained power and managed to found a world religion. In this case, his evil, something that Blake calls 'energy', made him a great leader (Norton: 72). In the incident of the brothel and the seclusion of women, it becomes evident that by secluding women, by making them and the men 'good', one achieves exactly the opposite. What the men can not have, they want the more. Desire, although in many religions treated as an evil attribute of humans, is something which needs to be accounted for. Rushdie seems to emphasise that there is a dialectic relationship between 'good' and 'evil', between passivity and energy, between rational and imaginative minds.

Thus, *The Satanic Verses*, much like Blake's poem, elaborates upon this issue in order to create a synthesis of belief. The theme of binary oppositions is played out in many of Rushdie's characters. Rushdie sees man as both devilish and angelic. Saladin Chamcha, his supposedly devilish protagonist, turns out to be the good one, whereas Gibreel Farishta (Farishta meaning 'angel'), turns out to be evil. Saladin Chamcha, who throughout all his life has pursued what is noble, and who regards himself as a man of "rigour, self-discipline [and] reason", goes through a transformation from evil to good (SV: 139-140). It is only when Chamcha acknowledges his shadow self, what he has repressed, his Eastern heritage, that the mutation from Saladin Chamcha to Salahuddin Chamchawala begins. Only when the grand narrative of 'picture-postcard' England fades, i.e., Saladin's false images of the all-encompassing benefits of liberal democracy and of secularism, does he find harmony.

²⁶ In *The Master and Margarita*, the devil is portrayed as one who causes "havoc upon the corrupt, materialist, decadent inhabitants", and thus, according to Rushdie, the devil might not be such "a bad chap after all" (IGF: 12).

Gibreel Farishta, on the other hand, is unable to forge a new identity since he cannot acknowledge his repressed guilt at past behaviour. Gibreel, who has always enjoyed himself while treating women badly, impersonates the Archangel Gibreel, identifies with pure goodness, but eventually fails since this is less than human. He constantly asks himself whether he is the devil or God. Rushdie states in his essay “In Good Faith” that people used to accept as true “that God and the Devil were one and the same” (IGF: 12). Thus, in order to illustrate his point, he let his unnamed narrator ask: ““Why demons, when man himself is a demon?”” Likewise, ““why angels, when man is angelic too?”” (SV: 422). As Rushdie repeatedly claims, there is no such thing as complete purity or impurity.

One of Rushdie’s characters, Rekha Merchant, confirms that the notion of binary opposition is unfounded:

‘This notion of separation of functions, light versus dark, evil versus good, may be straightforward in Islam [...] but go back a bit and you see that it’s a pretty recent fabrication. Amos, eight century B C, asks: “Shall there be evil in a city and the Lord hath not done it?” Also Jahweh, quoted by Deutero-Isaiah two hundred years later, remarks: “I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace and create evil; I the Lord do all these things.” It isn’t until the Book of Chronicles, merely fourth century B C, that the word *shaitan* is used to mean a being, and not only an attribute of God.’ (SV: 334)

In line with the ideas of Blake and the non-existence of clear-cut binary oppositions, Rushdie’s project can be summed up in the scene with Hind, the wife of Abu Simbel, the Grandee of Jahilia. Although the scene is brief and appears somewhat irrelevant on the surface, I will argue that this passage provides a key to Rushdie’s project:

‘You are sand and I am water,’ Mahound says. ‘Water washes sand away.’
‘And the desert soaks up water,’ Hind answers him. ‘Look around you.’ (SV: 124)

This part illustrates the battle between contraries, between purity and impurity. To sum it up, I will argue that this is Rushdie's way of presenting a world of contraries, both equally powerful and valuable. Firstly, if we relate this philosophical probing to the condition of the migrant, we can perhaps draw the conclusion that both the coloniser and the colonised are mixtures of opposing qualities, of rational and imaginative powers, all equally valuable, a fact which has to be recognised when re-creating identities. Rushdie exemplifies this by showing how Saladin Chamcha in his pursuit of Englishness, married Pamela Lovelace (who in return fled from her Englishness) merely because she inhabited

That voice stinking of Yorkshire pudding and hearts of oak, that hearty, rubicund voice of ye olde dream-England which he so desperately wanted to inhabit. (SV: 186)

Saladin failed because he did not accept his Eastern qualities. Both Pamela and Saladin failed to recognise the notion of complementarity and the validity of mixing and merging. By thinking in terms of simple dichotomies - the Indian was so and so, the British strictly the opposite - they rejected the implementation of valuable cross-cultural contributions into their lives, quite in accordance with fundamentalists who blindly refuse and detest any such contributions. Secondly, if we relate Rushdie's point to the exploration of doubt versus faith, we can argue that purity (water) has a potential for destruction, and impurity (sand) likewise. Both qualities are present, not as the doctrine of dualism claims, as two strictly opposing principals, but as attributes which exist simultaneously in man.

In Rushdie's world, extremes seem to blend into a synthesis. Through his characters Rushdie shows that by making compromises, one tends to accept and tolerate unexpected "combinations of human beings", the mixture of cultures, ideas, religion and politics (IGF: 4). *The Satanic Verses*, a novel that celebrates "change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining", thus concludes with the only possible solution: the compromise made by

former Saladin Chamcha, now Salahuddin Chamchawala, whose divided self only finds harmony when he accepts his heterogeneous identity, as a British/Indian subject.

Whether Rushdie's rhetoric was one of power and dominance or of liberation, by exposing the arrogant Western view of the West as civilized in opposition to the East as uncivilized, combined with his choice of Orientalist terms, Rushdie was seen to confirm the misconceptions and prejudices already prevalent among Westerners. Eager to confirm their suspicions about Muslims, they chose to embrace Rushdie's "Orientalism", whereas Muslims saw him as a scapegoat, serving an ideal target in an already "long-suppressed conflict" between the West and the Muslim world (Booker: 50).

Ran Greenstein claims that "'histories from below' are usually 'written from above'", an observation which clearly reminds us of "the enormous distance between subaltern and intellectuals" (Loomba: 257). If we take Rushdie as an example, one can argue that he remains quite Euro-centric in his approach (an allegation usually also granted to postcolonial theorists). Since he in many ways is "dependent on Western philosophies and modes of seeing, taught largely in the Western academy", his 'subaltern', mostly the masses of Muslim poor, see him as an outsider, a Westerner (256). By questioning and re-imagining the Muslim experience, Rushdie basically relies on the philosophies of Western post-modernist thinkers, raised and educated in secular societies. As history has shown, whereas the Shah of Iran failed by using a foreign vocabulary, understood by a small elite only, the Ayatollah Khomeini succeeded precisely because he spoke the language of the Muslim masses. *The Satanic Verses* spoke the vocabulary of secularism. Rushdie, claiming that "nothing is sacred in and of itself", believes that art should be "the third principle that mediates between the material and spiritual worlds", in order to offer us something new (IH: 416, 420). The question is whether his view on literature is compatible with Islamic views on literature.

CHAPTER 3

The Role of Literature

In Islamic versus Christian Western Societies

The iconoclastic nature of *The Satanic Verses* apparently conflicts with mainstream Islamic literature. Jamel Eddine Bencheikh claims in his essay “Islam and Literature” that “in Arab countries fiction is not fictive [and] literature can only speak of realities that leave no room for criticism or that end up with what is not said” (Braziller: 74). This is revealing, and indicates that a book such as *The Satanic Verses* stands no chance in the current climate of stern censorship. If fiction is not fictive, people expect to hear the truth while reading novels. As Mir Husayn Musavi, the prime minister of Iran protested, Rushdie’s novel was “neither a critical appraisal nor a piece of historical research” since Rushdie had not applied “objective methods of research” (Pipes: 110). Not only did *The Satanic Verses* speak of an unfamiliar reality that left ample room for criticism, but in addition, it ended up with what was simply not said, that the revelation was somewhat suspect. In other words, the novel’s final conclusion was that Muslims had to re-think their history and culture.

Pipes claims that in the Muslim world “books have a power rarely felt in the West” (Pipes: 110). Partly, this has to do with taboos, and partly “it reflects the rarity, and therefore the venerated quality, of the written word” (110). According to Bencheikh, due to this particular veneration, no Muslim will ever accept the figure of Mahound, a fictional figure representing Muhammad, “placed at the heart of an existing Islamic reality” (Braziller: 74). As he insists, a fiction of this type, claiming to be a substitute for the true Islamic reality, is necessarily perceived as an attack on religion. Likewise, he

insists that in the political and religious climate of the 90's, everything was subjected to censorship, since Khomeini's edict spread like cancer, "not only over the whole realm of the sacred, but also over the realms of morality, politics, society, sex, the family, [...] the fatherland" (76). As a result, everything has fallen into the category of insults, from being an insult to historical figures and mythology as well as "to people still living" (76).

According to Ramadan, there are modes of artistic expressions that are regarded as illicit in the Muslim world. Moreover, to those which are regarded as licit, there are certain clear conditions attached (Ramadan: 201-203). Although it lies beyond the scope of this thesis to elaborate upon this issue in detail, it is interesting to observe that the basic "conditions attached to authorisation", are that all modes of artistic expression "must remain in agreement with Islamic ethics and not bring about an attitude which contradicts them" (203). All "interpretation [...] must respect these ethics", and the entertainment concerned "must not lead people to forget their obligation towards God and fellow humans" (203).

By being exposed to, or by reading a novel, one like *The Satanic Verses* in particular, one necessarily stands in danger of being accused of westoxification, i.e., of being poisoned by Western values. Rushdie's novel is quite likely to be capable of bringing about attitudes that not only lead people to forget their obligation towards God (what if the revelations were merely hallucinations?), but attitudes which contradict Islamic ethics. Ramadan claims that in Islamic societies the function of art is not to question, challenge and distort, but to provide a "resting space", a place where man can increase his worthiness as an individual, and that it is only when art serves a function like this that it is "morally and humanly exacting" (204).

It is important to bear in mind that, as late as in the nineteenth century, similar views were articulated in the Western world. Worthy, or idealistic art was expressed in

the “aesthetic of romanticism”, and many writers and critics claimed that the goal of art was to “transcend the mundane and the material to express transcendent truth through beauty” (Ross: 3). However, at about mid-century, “the influence of many social forces caused aesthetic taste to change from romantic idealism to realism” (1). Many writers felt that they had to present life as it was, not as they wished it to be.

Although there are writers and critics who still favour the ideas of aestheticism, believing that the role of art is first and foremost to describe the ideal, clearly what is viewed as worthy art in Islamic societies differs from that of contemporary Christian Western societies. Muslim novelists are in addition frequently critical of tradition, and thus they are more than often viewed as a threat to the establishment. Given the fact that to a conservative Muslim, Islam is not a private faith, but a “way of life, a body of law, an all-embracing cultural framework”, novels are viewed as “distinctly unimportant and potentially troublesome”, particularly when a “mere novelist should dare to satirize fundamental religious beliefs” (Brians: 2).

Bencheikh observes that a recent Islamic conference in Riyadh held that there was “a cultural and ideological invasion aimed at the destruction of Islamic culture” (Braziller: 74).²⁷ This alleged destruction of Islamic culture is not only felt by Muslims countries greatly affected by globalisation, but, more seriously, by the Muslim diaspora, daily facing Western artistic modes of expression. This sense of a sweeping Western cultural entrenchment presents a great problem to many Muslims since they have no way of avoiding it. As Ramadan claims, all sorts of “artistic modes of expression” carry, in one way or another, “the imprint of the culture that produces them”, and thus, all those who live their daily lives in Europe, feel the urgency of addressing the issue of art and

²⁷ The statement is taken from Bencheikh’s essay “Islam and Literature”, p. 73-78 in Braziller.

culture (Ramadan: 199). The question of how to address the issue of art becomes a parameter of necessity.

Rushdie believes that we through literature can and must challenge the status quo, since literature can “open our eyes to the world” (IH: 77). He insists that

While the novel answers our need for wonderment and understanding, it brings us harsh and unpalatable news as well. It tells us there are no rules. It hands down no commandments. We have to make up our own rules as best as we can, make them up as we go along. And it tells us there are no answers; or rather, it tells us that answers are easier to come by, and less reliable, than questions. If religion is an answer, if political ideology is an answer, then literature is an inquiry; great literature, by asking extraordinary questions, open new doors in our minds. (*Imaginary Homelands*: 423)

Rushdie claims that there is a linguistically based dispute between religion and literature as well as between politics and literature (IH: 420). But, as he observes,

Whereas religion seeks to privilege one language above all others, one set of values above all others, one text above all others, [...] the novel does not seek to establish a privileged language, but it insists upon the freedom to portray and analyse the struggle between the different contestants for such privileges. (IH: 420)

The Satanic Verses does indeed, as a narrative discourse of resistance, portray and analyse the struggle between various authorities and their alleged monopoly of knowledge. By exploring the shifting relations between different languages of power, Rushdie satirises established conventions, while mediating between the material and spiritual worlds. However, there is reason to believe that his novel was seen as precisely a means of establishing a privileged language – the language of secularism above all others.

Paul Brians claims that due to eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy “intellectuals in the West largely abandoned the Christian framework as an explanatory

world view” (Brians: 2). Religion became for many the enemy, “the suppressor of free thought, the enemy of science and progress” (2). As many writers explored doubt more than faith, people were swayed away from religion rather than towards it (2). Fiction became to a certain extent an irritant to religion, frequently presenting itself as an alternative to it. Thus, as the novel came to be viewed as primarily oppositional, critical of the culture which has produced it, the issue of censorship became all the more relevant.

Censorship, Morality and Law

In the West, censorship is a “devil term”, something referring ‘back to’ a “Dark Age in Western history, or ‘down to’ reactionary elements: un-Enlightened or foreign elements which threaten to reverse the tide of progress in Liberal societies (Jansen: 4). As Sue Curry Jansen puts it, “Enlightened discourse views censorship as something others do: a regressive practice of un-Enlightened (non-Liberal) societies” (4).

According to Richard Webster, however, the West has not moved into “an area of unrestrained liberty”, as many liberals like to believe (Webster: 46). Artists and intellectuals who claim that censorship is only conducted in non-liberal societies, tend to forget that there do indeed exist laws whose purpose is to restrict freedom of expression, for instance the Race Relation Acts and the Law of Libel (45). Both these laws impose a form of censorship, and they are there precisely because most liberal democracies recognise that a complete freedom of expression could lead to a completely amoral universe (46). Webster claims that the battle over *The Satanic Verses* has become almost the Armageddon of free speech, almost a clash between two forms of fundamentalism (59). The battle is not, however, one between fundamentalism and freedom, but between

extreme liberals, defending “the right to proclaim the superiority of their own revelation and to abuse the gods who are worshipped by other, supposedly inferior cultures” (59). As such, the liberal contestants, embodying “substantial moral precepts and ideals” and having a clear idea of what is harmful, claim their right to primacy while rejecting other moral viewpoints (Coetzee: 23).

In Webster’s view, liberal intellectuals defend the writer’s right to freedom of expression with the same rigour and “the same blind zeal that the most militant kind of religious fundamentalists bring to the exposition of their own holy scriptures” (Webster: 60). As a consequence, authoritarian liberals are faced with the same sort of “burdensome moral responsibilities which fundamentalists have fled from throughout the centuries”, but instead of obeying laws which they claim are restrictive to progress and prevent novelists from having an ultimate freedom of expression, they apply the “‘bible-within’ of the individual conscience” (60).

Artists and intellectuals, by defending the textual integrity of novels, frequently evoke the aesthetic theory of art, which holds that art should be “subservient to no moral, political, didactic or practical purpose: its purpose is to exist solely for the sake of its own beauty” (Gray: 11). Contrary to this idea, Paul Vanderham claims that a work of art greatly affects its readers, and that a theory of literature subsequently should explain what literature “does do, or seems to do”, rather than what it should or should not do (Vanderham: 163). Although there existed an undercurrent of hatred between the Islamic world and the West which pre-existed *The Satanic Verses*, the novel seems to have brought about a broader division along religious, political and cultural lines, as well as having probably undermined and, conversely, strengthened religious belief. Literature does indeed have the capacity to influence its readers for better or worse, a fact that aestheticism overlooks (Dollimore: 99). The effect of literary works are sometimes

remarkably kinetic, and affect not only the way in which individuals respond to them, but also in what way governments think and act (99). Art can generate physiological changes in readers, such as piercing insight and sometimes terror and fear.

Nevertheless, most liberal intellectuals insist that art in itself is morally good, at least “more good than bad”, and therefore it should not be subjected to censorship (Webster: 61). To take such a position might, however, prove hazardous. How do we measure the effects of artworks – whether they will corrupt their audiences or have moral value? In other words, how do we decide whether the benefits outweigh the harm? And, most importantly, are the issues of morality and ethics to be discussed within the framework of Western liberal democracy?

According to John Stuart Mill, the state should neither promote “the morally admirable nor [sanction] the morally deplorable, as long as no one [was] harmed” (Coetzee: 17). How do we, however, define sanctionable harms? In Mill's view, only actions which were “detrimental to the community”, were sanctionable (17). Detriment, again, was to be measured by “the calculus of utility” (17). Coetzee, quoting Jeremy Bentham and Mill, observes that in the liberal tradition

An action [...] may be said to be conformable to the principle of utility [...] when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it. (17)

Mill's understanding of harm seems to be somewhat narrow, in believing that free speech clearly was in the best interests of all communities since it eventually would ensure progress (19). According to the “teleology of liberalism”, one should throw

Open the marketplace to contending forces because in the long run the market tends to the good, that is to say, to progress, which liberalism understands in a historical and even metaphysical light. (Coetzee: 11)

With hindsight, however, the teleology of liberalism seems to be completely at odds with the outlook of orthodox religion, which usually detects seductive and devilish forces “at the root of the power of representation” (11). This is without doubt an interesting and relevant issue, demonstrating that in a multi-cultural society the doctrine of liberalism needs questioning. As Coetzee observes, “in a war of representations, a war without rules” (a world of consumer capitalism), adherents of orthodox religions have no reason to believe that “good representations will triumph” (11). Coetzee quotes John Horton, who observes

What liberalism represents as the neutral requirement of preventing harm to others will be perceived by those with different conceptions of what is harmful as the enforcement of the morality they do not share. (Coetzee: 23)

The Rushdie case proved that art is not self-sufficient, but on the contrary must be subservient to moral, sociological and political purposes. Thus, it is necessary to view an individual work of art within its sociological or biographical context. When Iranian intellectuals in exile publicly defended *The Satanic Verses* against the censorship of it by the government of Iran, claiming that “in judging a work of art no considerations are valid other than the aesthetic ones”, they therefore not only performed a subtle form of censorship, but attempted to “neutralize the challenge” that *The Satanic Verses* presented to its readers, claiming that the novel was not really about what people thought it was about (Dollimore: 98, 99). In retrospect, it is easy to note just how greatly important other criteria are.

According to Jonathan Dollimore, “the aesthetic defence is always invoked selectively: we often allow art to challenge the things we think need challenging, rarely those we don’t” (99). If we look at *The Satanic Verses*, the Iranian intellectuals invoked the aesthetic defence in order to get the novel through the censors for academic purposes,

for the sake of literature. Ironically, if the Muslim community (those who protested) had invoked the aesthetic defence, or more precisely, consented to it being used, the whole issue might have faded almost instantly. As it were, by their violent protest, they ironically laid bare all the offensive passages and, through this, pointed to the mockery of Muhammad and the ridiculing of Islamic sanctities. As a result, Muhammad has perhaps become a more interesting person, worth examining. Again, with the benefit of hindsight, it looks as if the Muslim community instigated exactly what they struggled to prevent, namely a Western reaction and examination of their holy scriptures. Whereas they wanted to lead their community away from forbidden knowledge, they in fact opened more doors than they locked (101).

Daniel Pipes claims that the censorship of *The Satanic Verses* guaranteed “Rushdie a worldwide audience” and made the novel “the most famous book of the century” (Pipes: 202). Although this claim can be discussed, without doubt the novel is secured “a unique and enduring place in the history of literature”, which proves that although censorship might spawn ignorance, by preventing serious debates from taking place, censorship might also serve as a means of elevating an author to fame (202). The case of Anwar Shaikh is worth noticing. Shaikh wrote and published a book²⁸ considered to be far more offensive and blasphemous than Rushdie’s novel. His intention was to “torpedo the fundamentals of Islam” by deconstructing “the theological architecture of Islam so that the twin towers – the Koran and the Prophet – [collapsed] simultaneously” (Ali: 160). The Muslim community’s response in the *Daily Jang*²⁹ is interesting, particularly since Rushdie seems to be excused, whereas in fact he was accused of the very same things at the time:

²⁸ Shaikh, Anwar: *Eternity*, 1994

²⁹ The *Daily Jang* is "a conservative Urdu daily published in London and distributed all over Europe" (Ali: 158).

The truth is that we, the Muslims, protested against the accursed Rushdie's book foolishly because Rushdie is nothing compared to Anwar Shaikh. Rushdie forged untruths to make his novel attractive and we were able to satisfy our children on this ground. Anwar Shaikh, by contrast, has founded his work on quotations from the Holy Koran and the *hadiths* which are the cornerstone of our faith. (Ali: 159)

Shaikh, who claims that he speaks for millions of silent Muslims was branded an apostate, but "Muslim leaders were reluctant to publicise the affair" having learned that censorship might guarantee the author a wide readership (159). As Qari Sayyad Hussain Ahmed argued: "People should not organise protest lest Anwar Shaikh receives international fame" (159).

To conclude, censorship might guarantee the author fame while at the same time prevent constructive debates from taking place. As knowledge has come to be seen as a "social resource", as the very cornerstone of liberal democracy, the mere act of mentioning restrictions upon the freedom of speech, causes commotion in liberal quarters, and moreover, make people almost 'dash' for the banned books (Jansen: 167). The liberal image of a "'free-market of ideas'", serving everybody's interests, is supposedly protecting the belief that "knowledge is a right rather than a privilege" (167). However, the liberal ideas seem somewhat utopian, as Sue Curry Jansen puts it, they are "based upon flawed understandings of the nature of human perception, language, community and power-knowledge" (203). Clearly, the reaction to *The Satanic Verses* has revealed these particular flaws and gaps in understandings. Hopefully, however, it has opened up for more constructive and extended dialogues related to the issue of censorship in multicultural societies. With anticipation, the response to the novel has brought about a greater awareness of how morality and law naturally are matters depending on different perspectives.

Conclusion

This thesis has tried to explore the importance and relevance of Salman Rushdie's project for liberation, while displaying the radical nature of *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie's novel is a serious attempt at exposing the difficulties of the migrant condition while shedding light on the tension between politics and religion. By challenging righteous orthodoxy, whether political or religious, Rushdie holds liberal democracy, capitalism and British immigration laws up for questioning, while simultaneously satirising and deconstructing the Orientalist view of the Oriental. In addition, Rushdie attacks fundamentalist Islam in an attempt at exposing the danger of fundamentalism, claiming that those who advocate total explanations in the end cause havoc, and, by freezing time, prevent progress.

The Satanic Verses "fears the absolutism of the Pure", and therefore engages in a debate "between purity and impurity" (IGF: 4). Rushdie reverses the notion of good and evil, claiming that fundamentalist religion has distorted man's natural instinct by focusing solely upon the binary notions of good and evil, and thus rejecting the duality that exists in life. In Rushdie's view, it is essential that man recognises his dual nature, that he/she is capable of evil and good respectively, that there is no such thing as utter purity or impurity. At the same time, the migrant must recognise the non-existence of cultural authenticity and thus adapt hybridity in order to let newness enter the world. Only by embracing hybridity, by reconciling the East and West, and mixing the old and the new, can one adopt a sound identity in today's contemporary plural society.

According to Rushdie, life is not about confrontation (although his name will be forever associated with it), but about the making of compromises. In a rapidly changing

world, only individuals who compromise, by accepting that identity is a fluid phenomenon, and thus intermingle and adapt, will ensure progress.

Rushdie proposes literature as the great mediator between religion and politics and claims that it is the novelist's right to portray the world as he/she sees it. According to him, great novels are those who "attempt radical reformulations of language, form, and ideas" in order to "see the world anew" (3). Thus, his novel can be seen as an ideal attempt at bearing political and moral witness to the turmoil of contemporary world as well as a portrayal of the individual's struggle against oppressive autocracy and dogma. Rushdie's novel, by exposing the architecture behind repressive theories, clearly seeks to counter dominant social and political discourses in society. In other words, *The Satanic Verses* serves as a great example of a post-modern, postcolonial discourse of resistance.

However, it must be acknowledged that Rushdie was blasphemous. Although he maintains that he should not be taken that seriously, since he was only 'playing'; by playing with rules and assumptions that were taken for granted, his irony was to some extent used for subversive ends. Rushdie turned obscenity into a dangerous weapon. Despite the fact that his obscene language was "directed against the hard shell of rigidity and intolerance which is so visibly a part of Islamic fundamentalism", Webster insists that ordinary Muslims experienced it as "a dagger thrust deep into the affectionate heart of their faith – the most precious of all their possessions" (Webster: 92).

Rushdie insists that he attempted to "turn insult into strength" by reclaiming language from his opponents. But his particular vocabulary, one of post-modern 'relativism', was perceived as being imposed from 'above'. Webster admits that although obscenity can be liberating, because by repeating filthy or obscene words the words will lose their meaning, obscenity is only liberating in a "context of trusting relationship" (92). He makes a reasonable claim. By removing the words 'fuck' or 'fuck

you' from the context of intimacy, more often than not these terms are used to express hatred, bigotry or misogyny (92). According to Webster, Rushdie's attempt to turn insult into strength failed precisely because he was operating in a context of distrust. Thus, Rushdie was seen to make an "assault on the sacred language of faith", despite his alleged attempt to "'disenfranchise' the 'words of power'" (92).

J. M. Coetzee neatly observes how terms which seemingly should become "empty as they become embedded in usage — the fate of most names — on the contrary build up power to offend and anger" (Coetzee: 2). Coetzee claims that these terms, instead of dwindling, regain all their symbolic power when "brought out into the open in an act of speech" (2). Coetzee illustrates this with an example from South Africa, where the seemingly neutral term 'settler' became an outrageous insult when it was used in the context "one settler one bullet" (2). Clearly, words are never neutral; they lose or regain power depending on context. If we consider Rushdie's use of the name 'Mahound', for centuries a term of abuse, it is easy to understand that the term regained power since it was used by one presumed to be an outsider, a 'Westerner'.

The Satanic Verses exemplifies the power of language. Paradoxically, Rushdie, being fully aware of the power of words, manipulated words himself and thus it is necessary to hold the issue of freedom of expression up for questioning. Freedom of expression is not the same as freedom to offend. As established in Ruthven's *A Satanic Affair*, Anwar, a teacher of Pakistani origin, rejects the notion of a writer's right to use filthy and offensive language, and to write whatever he/she likes. In doing so, he is representative of a large part of the Muslim community, who thinks that in order to convey a message that carries possible negative connotations for the recipient, one has to show caution and speak indirectly, while all the time showing respect (Ruthven: 138). Anwar claims that although Rushdie's novel was fiction, "the image has been conveyed:

once you've said something it's conveyed'" (139). Anwar argues that "if you read something in a pornographic magazine, the picture it conveys may not be true. But the image stays with you.'" He makes a reasonable claim. Clearly, images and words do stick to people. You cannot unsay a word once it is uttered by claiming that it is a joke. Once you have said something, you have made an impact (139). Anwar believes that words are powerful beyond context, and thus we are responsible for what we say or write. He insists that "certain words have a certain plain meaning", and therefore one cannot try to justify them merely by invoking the aesthetic defence or by claiming they belong to the vocabulary of fiction (138).

By far, one can argue that the wide-spread reactions to *The Satanic Verses* have harmed the relationship between certain parts of the Muslim world and the West. Koenraad Elst claims that the lasting importance of the *fatwa* "sentencing Rushdie to death was to open the door for Islamist terror against Muslim freethinkers and non-Muslim critics of Islam" (Pipes: 257). Elst's argument is a reasonable one, particularly considering his observation that after September 11, 2001, "the taboo on criticism of Islam", has become "all the more apparent and public" (257). In addition, there has been a lot of Rushdie-related violence, attacks on translators, executions of dissidents in Iran, and people murdered for reading *The Satanic Verses* (258-259). Thus, due to the increasing terror in the aftermath of the Rushdie affair, "critics of Islam feel constrained to apply self-censorship or accept a life of living in fear" (260). Although some commentators welcomed Rushdie's novel, claiming that he was the man "who opened up a Pandora's box that many Muslim intellectuals had tried to keep shut for more than one and a half centuries", others feared that Rushdie had closed the doors to criticism of the Quran and the Prophet (199). Tariq Ali insists that the *fatwa* against Rushdie "put literature and critical thought on the defensive" (Ali: 157).

Rushdie convincingly argues that only by exposing and criticising the systems of power that imprison us, can the individual meet the challenges of our contemporary world. However, in my view, it is only by recognising the plural dimension of society that we can even begin to debate issues of religion, identity and the various systems of power. Only by acknowledging that the philosophy of Enlightenment and the concept of liberal democracy are unfamiliar to a large part of the world, can we, as responsible citizens and intellectuals, begin to understand the complexity of the issue. We do not live at ‘the end of history’³⁰, where Western systems of power have unanimous acceptance. Far from witnessing a world in which societies welcome the “emergence of a pervasive consensus on liberal-democratic principles”, we inhabit a world of increasing religious activism and a sway away from secularism, rather than towards it (Foreign Affairs: 38).

Thus, despite the fact that Rushdie’s novel brought issues of great relevance to the forefront, and that his thematic probing to a large extent is justified, Rushdie should perhaps have shown more consideration while writing a piece of fiction that so closely resembles what Muslims at large consider to be historical reality. His choice of settings, and of title and vocabulary, are clearly dubious. His questioning of Islamic practices is conducted from a secular viewpoint. Thus, while claiming to speak for minority groups, by proposing a discourse of resistance, sadly, Rushdie’s project did not take into account the feelings and beliefs of the very same minority groups.

Anouar Majid argues that Western liberals for long have been looking for “a new paradigm to make sense of [the] ‘new world order’” (Hawley: 85). The end of the Cold War caused global structural changes, and Majid, quoting Jean Ziegler, observes that there are no “new paradigms to account for these bewildering changes” (85). Thus, when Samuel Huntington came up with his somewhat notorious “civilizational paradigm”,

³⁰ This term is taken from ‘the endist argument’, the notorious theory advocated by Francis Fukuyama in 1989 when the world underwent serious upheaval and many intellectuals commemorated the end of the Cold War.

presenting “the Confucian-Islamic alliance as the newest challenge to the West”, he evoked a “deep-seated Western fear of what is called the “other”, and [his argument] continues to present Islam as an intractable threat to the West” (85).

Majid claims that the changes have been met by “a literature that questions the basic premises of Islam, and argues for the liberation of individuals into the amorphic world of secularism” (85). According to him, however, this literature fails to see

The resurgence of Islam as a concrete response to these bewildering developments [...] it limits its argument to freedom from the shackles of the past, without outlining a viable prospect for genuine creativity. (85)

Majid criticises Muslim writers who “question Islamic traditions from a Western secular perspective”, while finding refuge in a “hollowed universalism” (86). He is making a plausible claim. While conducting a form of illiberalism in the name of freedom of expression, some writers and intellectuals tend to forget that we inhabit a world of competing voices and discourses, each and one of them insisting that they be heard. Although many liberals view any restrictions on freedom of expression as forms of subtle censorship and thus as ‘un-Enlightened’, it is, however, in my view, not ‘un-Enlightened’ to obey laws of courtesy and respect. Nor is it un-Enlightened to show tolerance for the same issues on which ‘Enlightened’ societies demand tolerance. In our contemporary world of pluralism, we must seek strategies for building bridges, in order to share, understand and enjoy literature across cultural boundaries. In an increasingly multicultural society, it is of vital importance that we elaborate upon the issues of freedom of expression and censorship in order to reach a compromise, and as such ensure progress and integration. Cultural differences clearly affect our perception when it comes to art, ethics and morality, and as a consequence, it is vital that we not only study our

different frames of references, but simultaneously give voice to all conflicting views in order to meet the challenges of the contemporary world.

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